



Best of
ASIAN EROTICA 1

Edited by **RICHARD LORD**

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Introduction

Eroticism is on the march; or maybe it's more apt to say, it's on the slink. Whatever the proper term, perhaps nowhere is that advance more evident than in Asia, which has by far the largest population of any continent. Asia practices eroticism in fascinating ways and, recently, Asian writers and writers based in Asia have been chronicling some of this eroticism.

In the second half of 2006, Monsoon Books (Singapore) published *Best of Singapore Erotica*, the first anthology of erotic fiction (along with a handful of erotic poems) ever released in Singapore. That volume proved to be a surprising success: not only did it dominate Monsoon's own bestseller list for many months, but just four months after the collection first hit the bookstores, we were going into our second edition.

Strongly encouraged by the success of this venture, Monsoon decided a few years later to come out with a second collection of erotic short fiction. This time, however, the company decided to cast its nets wider and brought out *Best of Southeast Asian Erotica*, in which four other countries were included. (The new territory included Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.) Although it only appeared in late 2010, this book, too, seems to be a success, both critically and commercially. Now we are taking our erotic sampling out into a new frontier: the world of ebooks.

The stories included in these first two e-collections represent a mix-and-match of the best works from the two earlier print volumes. We have dropped the flash fictions and poems from our *Best of Singapore Erotica* collection

and then merged them in these first two volumes of ebooks with pieces from the *Best of Southeast Asian* collection.

As the first collection was composed entirely of Singapore stories, there is still a heavy presence of Singapore fiction in both of these first volumes. Subsequent volumes feature first-rate erotic fiction (and some non-fiction) from throughout Asia.

But what we offer here is exemplary of the principles we employed throughout in selecting stories for the first two print collections: good stories, well-written, though with a definite erotic flavour. This is not pornography; it is a sub-genre of full-bodied literature which looks at and celebrates the sensual and the sexual in the human experience. These stories were not chosen simply because they titillate (though many of them do that as well), but because they delight, inform and sometimes even enlighten and ennable.

We enjoyed putting both collections together (as you might well imagine). We think you will enjoy reading these stories and seeing why Asia is fast becoming the world centre of eroticism in all its richness and variety.

A Dummy's Guide to Losing Your Virginity

Meihan Booey, Singapore

“Shall I tell you what makes love so dangerous?

T’is the too high idea we are apt to form of it.”

—Ninon L’Enclos, 17th-century courtesan

I lost my virginity to a man named Pierre two weeks after meeting him.

Well, *of course*, Pierre isn’t his real name. How many real Frenchmen do you know named Pierre? Enid Blyton names every other Frenchman “Pierre” in her kiddie novels, but in real life, most Frenchmen have names like Philippe or Jean or something entirely unpronounceable. It’s never as simple as Pierre.

Anyway, Pierre isn’t French, he’s Belgian. He is whiter than white, has perfect skin (perfect enough, that is, to be remarkable for his age), brown eyes, sandy-grey hair, and a huge cock that swells up and sticks out perpendicularly from his very thin body like a rose-red battering ram.

I was saying that I lost my virginity to him two weeks after meeting him. I suppose you’re wanting an explanation of this somewhat extraordinary

statement. It's just not worth the bother. Therefore, feel free to fit us both into any convenient category of human behaviour. Rest assured, I will not complain. Complaining, I find, is the refuge of the weak and unimaginative who have neither the courage to put up with shit nor the wherewithal to get out of it.

However I *will* answer the usual round of questions.

1. Yes, he is married.
2. Yes, I knew it.
3. Yes, he's a horny old man. Exactly 23 years older than me, if you like precise figures.
4. Yes, I am Asian—Chinese, if you also enjoy precise descriptions. And I therefore qualify, as my little brother pointed out with a shudder, as an SPG.
5. No, he didn't dump me after one night of sex ... BUT!
6. Yes, the relationship is pretty much all about sex.

By the way, yes, you are free to join my brother and think of me as an SPG. I like the phrase “Sarong Party Girl” really. Wear a sarong, go out and party. Of course, the SPG’s reason for wearing a sarong—or whatever conveniently unwrappable dress is in fashion these days—and going to a party is usually to pick up a White Man. Whether or not this was my specific intention while partying in a sarong, I’m not bothering to clarify. You are perfectly free to draw your own conclusions about me, as I am of you.

I became Pierre’s mistress without intending to. What I *was* intending was to do was sleep with him so as to get rid of my tiresome virginity, which had been left stubbornly on my hands for 26 years.

I was telling you Pierre had a cock like a battering ram. A virgin pussy becomes deeply startled when faced with the prospect of penetration by a

battering ram. A pulse of sheer panic raced up and down me when the whole bulk of it emerged from between the silver teeth of his zipper.

“That’s not going to fit! It’s HUGE!” I bellowed, flinging all thought of seductive atmosphere, which I’d been carefully building up for three hours, to the winds. Pierre shook his head, disparagingly. “Average,” he murmured, “average.”

The average size of the male penis is six to seven inches erect. Proportionately, Pierre was not wrong, though, for he is six foot tall. His problem is that he is underweight for his height, so that a penis which would have looked relatively proportionate for a six-foot, 180-pound man, looks preposterously gargantuan for a six-foot man who only weighs 135 pounds.

Now, I am very short, even for an Asian girl. I didn’t even know if I had enough piping for this plunger.

“Think of it as a baby’s head,” he persuaded me silkily, pushing me quite firmly down under him. “That’s what it’s built for, right?”

“I suppose so,” I replied dubiously, and gritted my teeth.

Pierre had been told by a friend that I was a virgin. He did not believe I was a virgin. I did not act like a virgin and I hadn’t bothered to tell him. Because if I had, he wouldn’t have slept with me; it’s that simple.

“I shouldn’t have been your first experience,” he exclaimed in dismay when he finally asked and I told him.

This surprised me, because I had judged him at first glance very much the way you might have been doing up to this point. I had seen a nattily dressed, charmingly seductive older European man, freely discussing his experiences with many girlfriends. I had therefore fit him neatly into that handy category, the Horny White Man.

Oh, let me elaborate just a little. Horny White Man: Good in bed, generous with women, dislikes long-term relationships, probably divorced/

married, adulterous. The HWM is the antithesis of the SPG, which is why they are drawn to each other. HWMs are for the most part weak in character, strong in personality, easily led but difficult to pin down. It takes our strong-willed SPGs five minutes to lead a HWM to the altar, and an ensuing five years (or the equivalent in alcohol) to force them to sign the registry.

I suppose there are degrees of Horny White Man-ness, just as there are degrees of Sarong Party Girl-ness. Some are merciless, some are buoyant with random sincere affection, some are in-between. I am in-between; Pierre, as I grow to know him, is closer to the extreme of sincere, emotional attachment for every beautiful woman on earth, and some not so beautiful as well. (And a few who are not, technically, women. Don't ask.)

But we were talking about the sex.

I believe the secret to good sex is enjoying your own body. I am inordinately vain about my body. I have perfect breasts, each one a nice firm but soft handful, set high and full against my ribcage; I have a splendid waist, nicely tucked-in, and very comfortable, plus round, dimpled arms and legs. I have little love for my ass, but Pierre turned out to like it best, so altogether I believe myself a regular Aphrodite, and knowing oneself to be an Aphrodite does wonders for one's performance in bed.

A book called *The Satanic Witch* suggests that men are most turned on by underwear they're *not* supposed to be seeing (i.e. not the half-naked stripper doing the pole dance on the stage, but the primly dressed girl whose thong might be just peeking out over the top of her jeans). Most importantly, one must make the most of what one has, whether it be sexual charisma, bedroom eyes, or a good set of tits. The important thing is to seem accessible without seeming easy.

I have always loved my tits. The first man to squeeze them was a fellow called Jeff. He watched me dancing on a platform with my tits on the verge

of bouncing entirely free of my slightly exposed bra, until he approached me for a dance and took the opportunity to grope me, first one breast, then the other. Growing bolder, he pressed his fingers inside my blouse, then my bra, and fingered my nipples. That was rather nice, but then I decided he would be no fun as a First Experience (random gropers seldom are) and escaped.

On the whole, I am glad I waited for Pierre, who flirted before he seduced, and seduced before he groped, which is only polite.

The first part of me he saw naked was my left breast, which he peeked at by lifting the corner of my blouse. Being very pleased with my breasts, as I've explained, I allowed him.

"Now I can't stand up," he murmured, smiling faintly. "Everyone will see."

I thought this rather complimentary, considering the vast number of tits he has seen in his career as a ladies' man. We then progressed, after a great deal of impolite cuddling, to bed.

Having believed myself in possession of a perfect body for so long, it seemed a marvelous moment to finally show it off, in all its glory, for another human being's appreciation. It was unwrapped by stages; it was rubbed first, through my clothes, through my bra, then under my bra, which was finally unhooked. I presented my naked tits to him for further attention, which he gave most obligingly. He then searched under my skirt, discovered perfectly ordinary white cotton panties and was extremely pleased.

This is not to say that I lay there like a blow-up doll. I had saved my virginity not out of a sense of sexual morality, but out of an abhorrence of waste; I didn't want to waste that first, irretrievable experience on the male version of a blow-up doll. I therefore had no intention of being anything less than responsive. Being determined to leave my state of inexperience with a vengeance, I began with what would become my favourite beginning—a

blow job.

Blow jobs interest me. I have a friend for whom sex has been a matter-of-fact affair since the age of fourteen. She has made love in all conceivable positions, licked, sucked, tickled and teased every easily accessible orifice of her longtime boyfriend's body (and he hers), attempted interesting experiments with honey, wax, chocolate, whipped cream. Yet her imagination is not what one would call vast.

“What does cock taste like?” I asked her eagerly once.

She shrugged disinterestedly. “Like skin, lah,” she replied.

Admittedly, her simple answer made me a whole lot less afraid of giving a blow job, and when I finally had the chance to fit a cock into my mouth, I went at it with enthusiasm. Let it never be said that I give a sloppy blow job! Oh no. The very idea of a blow job deeply entices me.

There is so much to a man's cock besides the taste of skin, lah. There is the thin, silky texture of the shaft as your tongue slides over it, the soft, warm marshmallow of the head that quickly tightens into a hot, quivering ball when your lips close over it. I have longed to give a blow job ever since I read about it in my mother's copy of *Everywoman*, to find all the tickly bits with my tongue and suck milk from the tip like an infant on a nipple. To feel the soft flesh grow hot and stiff in my mouth is an instant of the most irrevocable power a woman can have over a man. In short? Cock, basically, tastes pretty damn good.

Another question I asked my matter-of-fact friend: what does semen taste like?

“Salty,” she said.

Another, more descriptive girl said, “At first, it's thick and goes goosh, goosh, goosh. After that it's thinner and kind of watery and it just goes spurt. Splut. Sppt.”

I investigated with great interest the taste of semen. This particular batch was, well, salty. With a hint of cigarettes and alcohol. And it was something between the goosh and the splut.

Having been a virgin for twenty-six years, I'd had plenty of time to consider what a cock would feel like, as well as taste like. "It's a muscle," Pierre explained to me one day, much later, favouring me also with the various Latinate anatomical names for various regions of the male genitalia.

This includes the perineum, which is apparently the "male clitoris", the interesting wrinkly bit of skin between the end of the balls and the beginning of the asshole. For women, this is mainly just a bony bit that bruises if you're too skinny, but not for men, it seems.

I once knew a girl who described a large bodybuilder as having a body that "felt like one giant, erect cock." So yes, I must say, a giant, erect cock feels rather like a miniature bodybuilder. The skin is soft, what's beneath is hard and pulsates with small movements like the smaller tendons and fibres in a very lean bodybuilder's arm.

Pierre took his time about putting his miniature bodybuilder to its appropriate use. The lingering moments he spent in fondling my breasts, running his tongue around my ass and flicking it across my clitoris, all reassured me more and more than I had picked the right man to be rapidly experiencing the First Time with.

I had to consciously refrain from reaching orgasm within five seconds of feeling his massive cock snugly slipping inside me. I will not attempt to describe how it feels, because English is woefully short of subtle language for sex. (Unlike, say, ancient Greek or Roman Latin, which got very specific about who was doing what to whom with what, and where.)

The earth didn't move. It didn't have to. I just had an explosive orgasm, with every muscle of my body. An explosive orgasm is as descriptive as it

needs to get, really.

Pierre himself took his time about it. This is rare for a man, but the whole point of picking him over any number of other men was the high probability that he knew how to do it.

That was the end of my virginity. And it's funny, but when I think back on it, there are two moments in my life that have been such great triumphs they fill me with a lasting sense of purpose and *joie de vivre* that continue to echo throughout my life.

One was losing my virginity to a stranger named Pierre. And the other is none of your business.

For now.

About the author:

Meihan Boey has been writing for pocket money since she was fifteen. (Fortunately her pockets are quite small.) By her current great age, she's published children's books, gay literature, pornography, religious propaganda, government propaganda, safety manuals, and a lot of comic book scripts. She currently works for a bookstore, making money for other writers, and is also an endurance athlete, because you get such great ideas while trying to distract your brain from intense physical pain for five hours.

And Then She Came

Jonathan Lim, Singapore

And then she came.

Across the wet grass between the dormitory blocks, heralding herself with a strident, indrawn wail like the sound of darkness laughing.

If any of the wakeful inmates heard her, they did not look up. If they had seen, they would not have dared to believe. Only he knew.

For she was coming to him.

The tree outside his dorm window shuddered, shaking off a night fragrance that was not its own—a scent pungent to the point of rot.

The boy lay naked on his bed, knowing there was no point in being anywhere else. She would have him there and had been violent getting him there on previous nights; he did not wish to extend the struggle or invite her wrath. Her affection was terrible enough.

One night, months ago, returning late from a party where he had drunk *almost* too much, he'd glimpsed her—a pale stranger, standing on the edge of a dark field. Not sober enough to be superstitious, he had lingered and looked. As he ogled, overstepping curiosity and forgetting caution, his as-yet-untried manhood swelled with lecherous urges. Then he had stumbled on his way.

But she had sensed him. Had heard his unworded lust, felt his molesting

thoughts as he passed into the night.

And she had responded.

Every night since.

Every single night since, he had refused all engagements, denied all company, in order to be in his room at this time, in his bed, waiting for her to come and claim him and take her pleasure.

He no longer even bothered to stay clothed. He knew how she wanted him and no longer had any desire to appear otherwise when she arrived. Her will was like white-hot iron—everything melted and cleaved to it before shrivelling to nothing in the heat. All his waking hours had yielded to the marauding night. Entire days shrank into a few sweaty hours. The nocturnal torments reverberated through his twenty-two-year-old mind all through the day. His body ached, his balls were knots of dull pain, taut with overuse. His cock, so unbelievably tender from having been so unbelievably hard, did not feel like it belonged to him any more.

And it didn't.

The curtains fretted in the otherwise still air. She had arrived.

The fluorescent tube coughed briefly, spitting darkness, then recovered. Two weeks ago, he had taken to leaving the lights on in the vain hope that this would either weaken her or strengthen him. Now, she liked it this way. It forced him to see his body being used, watch his cock take on the angles she imposed, watch it shiver uncontrollably as it spewed forth the essence she extracted from him with her mouth, her hands, her dead vagina.

Now into the room she came, and at once her presence pressed down on him. He sank into the sheets, paralysed. His eyes reeled, compensating for his body's immobility, and in answer to his search, she took form. Out of the still air, a faint haze became a fog, then developed outlines and contours, grew

solid and opaque ... and then she was there.

She was beautiful, but not in a way the living or sane could possibly comprehend. *What did that make him?* he wondered—but the thought flickered away, terrified of itself.

She, too, was naked—but while his body shuddered with shame, hers was defiantly bared. Her skin shone faintly with a glow that made him think of shapeless, writhing plant-things, fathoms deep in the sea. She must have been young when she died and took this form—how long ago? Decades? Centuries? Living death had drained her of moist youth and left her skin smooth but powdery, her breasts paler and colder than marble.

Her eyes were cruel and colourless. She rarely looked at his face or met his gaze—her obsession lay elsewhere, her control already complete. Her hair glistened but was not wet; moving in response to winds he could not feel. Her teeth were not sharp—she had bitten him often, yet he had never bled—still, they were a predator's teeth. She never touched his lips or kissed him, those actions meant nothing when she could bite, suck, swallow every other inch of him.

She was now stretched out in the air above him, looking ravenously at his meticulously gym-toned body. The inches between them filled with lead, crushing him against the mattress.

Her hands reached down and began to touch him.

Her fingers, cold and raking, ranged across his torso. In the beginning, he had expected to be repulsed by the touch of death, to seek refuge behind stubborn flaccidity. Let her mangle his limp body till she shrieked her way back into the night in banshee frustration, he'd defiantly thought.

But his body was a traitor. While his mind recoiled, scrabbling away from all that she was and everything she did, his body responded to that

ancient pact of flesh and lust. Even now, he shuddered and trembled at her touch; as his nipples tingled beneath her fingertips, humiliation rushed to his hot cheeks. He was more disgusted by his own raging flesh than by the outrage of her hands.

Her hands traveled downward, hard nails scraping faint red trails across his helpless abs. And still downward.

His humiliation was now complete. Even before he felt her touch on his cock, he had felt her desire; and already his cock strained towards her, mocking him. Was this the erection dead men had? The hardness of impulsive death rather than vigorous life? Was it dead blood that was hardening in his veins, engorging his betrayed manhood?

Then she took him into her mouth, so deep that she would have choked if she could still breathe. With horror, he felt her lips touch his pubes, his cockhead rub against the flaking inside of her dust-dry throat. The only wetness was his—the shameful ooze of precum that his cock treasonously offered up to lubricate her impalement.

Would she drink his first load? She sometimes did, as if receiving a preliminary offering before the cruel consummation. She could afford to let a load or two go astray, as she seldom left him before he had surrendered his young seed three or four times. In the early weeks, he had felt as if she would empty his balls for good and leave him desiccated, but his body stunned him by repeatedly and consistently satisfying her hunger, against his will.

But this night, her hunger was acute, she wanted his warmth inside her. Already now she was poised over him, her body gaping over his turgid cock. Her eyes met his suddenly, pinning his frantic gaze, and her lips stretched into a merciless leer as she lowered herself onto him. Her cold clamminess drew him in, the emptiness of her pulling him deeper and deeper, as if she would suck his whole body into her—to fill her hollowness, to warm her

from the core to the underside of her skin. As if his hot wet life could quench the death that raged in her.

She began riding him, taking him deep with every downward thrust, her body never touching the bed. He could feel the dryness of her vaginal passage rasping against his swollen, throbbing cock. Her silence terrified him: her body displayed all the abandon of lust, but she emitted none of the noisy breathing that underscored physical pleasure. The silence seemed to sharpen her intent, to take all of him, to rape his body until he lost his mind and she possessed his soul.

His young body was stiff against the bed—arms useless, legs unresponsive. He could not resist, could not pull back his groin to deny her. Locked into place, his erection was like a skewed tombstone upon which her insatiable lust perched.

He was getting close. Soon he would offer up this night's first hot libation, a fluid guarantee of his enslaved virility. Any minute now, the dead muscles wouldgulp at him as his life spurted out in creamy ropes, flowing upwards into whatever emptiness comprised her insides.

As she dragged him towards climax, he understood with searing clarity that he would never belong to anyone else again. Least of all himself. Before anyone else had had the chance, her touch had claimed him. What remained of his life would be spent in the burning shame of nightly surrender ... until he had nothing left to offer, even to her.

And then?

Somewhere inside his head, plummeting downwards through the chasm that her lust had opened in his mind, his dwindling reason began to scream.

And then he came.

About the author:

Jonathan Lim is a director, actor and playwright. His dramatic writing ranges from 14 years' worth of the sketch comedy spoof show *Chestnuts* to WILD RICE's 2006 hit pantomime *Oi! Sleeping Beauty!!*, as well as musicals like *Women on Canvas* and plays like his one-man show, *Emerald Hole*. His poetry has appeared in *CAPSULE* and on the front page of Singapore's Today newspaper. His writings tend towards the ghostly in theme, such as the play *People Say Got Ghost*; his musical *H is for Hantu* (featuring a singing Pontianak); and his first book on the supernatural - *Between Gods And Ghosts* – which is out in bookstores now.

Awakening

Yusuf Martin, Malaysia

Syafiqah was not sure just where the old fragment of book came from, but she was bored and it was the only material to hand that she had not read. She had finished the American book about the teenage vampire, the slushy one that was made into a film, that one with that American girl whose father had been a mediocre country and western singer some years before. Therefore, as it was raining, she reached for the yellowing book, wiped the dust carefully from the first and last pages and the broken spine, sat on the corner of her bed and began to read.

In the golden morning kampong half-light, still slightly scented by a smoky mosquito coil, Amir Hussain, a bronzed, muscular young Indian stood in his newly laundered white dhoti, which lingered teasingly between the girlish curvature of his waist to a centimetre above his youthful knees.

Syafiqah noted that the book had no actual cover, only pages and a spine. Several of the first stories, in what appeared to be a volume of short stories, seemed to be missing. All the information Syafiqah had about the book was in fine print at the top of the page facing her—page 62. This suggested that the book, when it was whole, had been *The Best of Southeast Asian Erotica Volume 2*, whatever that was.

She shrugged; the title meant nothing to her, but, a little intrigued, she

began dipping into the story. At sixteen, with all the normal peculiarities of a mid-teen, Syafiqah readily found herself identifying with the main character, Farah, a Malay girl who, like Syafiqah, lived in a small rural kampong.

Eagerly, Syafiqah read on, but a little puzzled.

Shafts of Mediterranean yellow light pierced the musky ambience of the wooden lean-to's interior. It revealed a fresh glistening moistness on Amir's arms and upper torso as he strained to manipulate firmly resistant oiled dough, in preparation for making roti canai.

‘Shafts of Mediterranean’. Syafiqah had read about the Mediterranean. It was in Europe, wasn’t it? Why were there shafts of European light coming into a kampong lean-to. Was it a kampong lean-to in Europe then? How odd.

With a combination of curiosity and the need to be engaged in something, Syafiqah decided that to enjoy the story, she must really put her questioning aside until she had finished reading it, otherwise there was no way she was going to enjoy it. So, on she read …

Small beads of sweat gathered at his brow, catching the sunlight as Amir toiled in the warmth of his father's morning shop, serving to highlight the smooth, rich, dark, chocolate brownness of his skin. Carefully, he wiped the salty, oily sweat away, preventing it from falling into the dough he was kneading and tainting it.

‘Eee—yuk, sweat,’ said Syafiqah with a mock shudder, then ‘Mmm … chocolate.’

Amir was customarily focussed, earnest about his task as he continued massaging the moist dough until it became pliant, kneading the soft, slightly resistant substance, feeling it, in its tenaciousness, bouncing back at the touch of his firm masculine hands. For a moment, just for a moment, the soft silky dough enveloped his hands in a supple oily caress. Busy, Amir did not allow the dough to linger, rejecting its touch and the promise of soft intimacy.

Ten-what? What is tenaciousness, is it like nine-aciousness, but with one extra. Syafiqah reached for her *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and looked the word up. Ah, yes, okay. Well, why couldn't they say that then? she said to herself, frowned and once more began to read.

In the robust rhythm of his work method, Amir could feel the smooth slippery dough squeeze between his strong fingers like a gentle lover's kiss, warm, soft yet irrepressibly elusive. Repeatedly, Amir touched the waiting dough, and the dough, though to all intents and purposes inanimate, touched him gently, lovingly back. Even when Amir was a little rough, the dough embraced his roughness, subsumed it into itself and gave pliancy in return, understanding that tough love often came before the needed tenderness.

When the initial pulling and touching were spent, when Amir understood that the dough, despite qualms, was truly ready, Amir would take firm hold of the oiled, manipulated dough in both of his strong, damp hands, lift the dough and toss it back firmly, almost roughly onto its oiled bed. He stretched the dough, massaged it, feeling it relax, become more submissively elastic under his sturdy, determined hands. Again, the supple dough would be lifted and thrust back, down onto the waiting surface, and again, and again, adding to its already acquiescent suppleness. A total of eight times, the now obedient dough would be lifted and returned, forcefully, manfully to the oily surface, its compliance subtly growing with each vigorous stretch.

Quickly, the dexterous Amir would flip the corners of the oily dough over, side by damp side and side over oily side into the centre, until all four sides of the griddle bread lay together at the centre of the dough, forming closely intimate layers. Then, the mass would be lifted once more and, deftly grabbing one side, Amir would gently pull it over the whole—a headscarf over a newly married woman's wanton tresses, indicating her freshly found sensual status, binding the succulent, moisty accommodating layers together.

These infinitely smooth layers of kneaded dough and oil would aid the bread to become crispy, comfortably hard when heated on the sturdy flat griddle, separating them out, giving the roti canai its traditional crusty layered texture and deeply delicious flavour. Amir would manhandle each roti canai in exactly the same way, resolutely stretching and pulling, grasping and caressing until the whole batch was ready for the griddle and, ultimately, the ecstasy of gratuitous consumption by some waiting, welcoming, mouth.

Mmm, this is making me hungry; I wonder what *Mak* is making for lunch. Syafiqah tried to ignore her growing hunger pangs and returned to the text.

Most days, in the glow of the early morning and in the failing roseate light of evening time, Amir worked hard for his father—making roti canai at their rural wooden lean-to and making money by selling the crispy, slightly oily, unleavened griddled breads to their eager regular customers.

Through his ardent toil, Amir gained in stature both in his family and in the local community. The heroic Amir’s hard working diligence was the talk of the kampong. He was regular, punctual, and served the best-made roti canai for miles around. Everyone knew this, everyone appreciated this.

For the few idle female customers—those with nothing better to do than to dream, sigh over young athletic men—and the few heavily breathing male customers too, it also helped that Amir was devilishly handsome, with sharp, aesthetically pleasing Indian features. For he was as close as the kampong dwellers would ever get to the uncommon beauty of an Indian movie star. No doubt, Amir being comely added more than a frisson of spice to the kampong dwellers daily lives and to their purchasing of the layered breads, knowing that, inevitably, Amir was there waiting, silently servile to service their pleasure.

Because of Amir’s youth, his gentle, yet firm mannerisms and his

obvious beauty, he seemed to attract many admirers, young and old. Early in the morning, every morning, as the kampong awakened from another hot, sultry night of insect orchestrations and firefly illuminations, before too many other kampong dwellers were abroad, two mid-teen schoolgirls—Farah and Mira—would be sent by their mothers to collect roti canai for their respective father's breakfasts. It had become their daily routine.

Along the worn kampong track, between the roundly, curvaceous pendulous papaya and the firmly erect banana plants, past shadowy tall coconut trees blessed with hirsute rotund fruit and scented curry-leaf bushes, the two friends would walk, perhaps a little too eagerly, heading in the scant morning light towards the wooden lean-to where Amir, the kampong's master baker, created roti canai.

A short time ago, shortly after Hussain's son Amir had taken over the making of the much desired roti canai from his father, the two girls had discovered, quite by accident, a loose board at the rear of the lean-to where Amir wrestled with dough. At first, the loose board, hanging limp and uninteresting, held no interest to the two girls, but when Farah, the slightly elder of the two, approached the misplaced plank, it seemed somehow more erect. She managed to peer through the gap its displacement had made, and practically melted at the sight of the golden Amir as morning shafts of sunlight played across his hard-working form.

Hastily, guiltily, Farah wanted to replace the board. She blushed. She momentarily had been tempted to keep the discovery to herself; however, at Mira's insistence, she let her friend gaze through the hole—into wonderland.

That adrenalin-pumping, pubescent hormones-raging morning, the two girls, now more than a little excited, giggled all the way back home and, later, giggled all the way to school on the banana-coloured bus. At school, they kept their warm, dark secret until it was time to catch the ancient yellow

bus back home once more, then giggled and fantasised all the way back to their homes.

It was at that point that there was a knock on the door. ‘*Adik, what are you doing in there? You are so quiet.*’ Self-consciously, Syafiqah dropped the book fragment to the floor, giving it a little kick so it slid under her bed—she was worried that her mother might catch her reading unsuitable material. ‘*Nothing Mak, just tidying.*’

‘*Okay. Don’t forget that I will need help with the laundry later.*’

‘*No, Mak,*’ said Syafiqah. Her mother had not entered Syafiqah’s bedroom, so, when she considered it safe again, Syafiqah got down on her hands and knees and dragged the tomb out from where it rested—under the bed amongst dust and black-and-white house lizard debris. With a tinge of excitement now, she began to read on.

The following day, each girl dared the other to spy through the gap in the wooden boards, but neither dared to as they were frightened that they would be caught—and what could they possibly say in their defence, if they were caught. Their secret remained between them, as tangible as the breasts that began to strain their blouses.

Some days and some warm, dream-filled nights went past, with the longing to spy on Amir becoming greater with each passing day, until Farah, untypically alone, stopped while walking to the lean-to for her father’s breakfast.

Carefully, she walked to the back of the wooden lean-to and, looking around to make certain she was not being observed, prised open the already loose board. The gap was ever so slight, but large enough for Farah to see what she desired to see. Cautiously, guiltily, she put her almond eye right up against the opened crack, and gazed into the musty depths of the wooden lean-to.

The beautiful young Amir, with his back to the intently spying girl, was intent upon kneading the soft dough for roti canai. Farah, dressed for school in her light blue-and-white uniform and carrying the payment for her father's roti canai in her hand, had crept to the rear of the lean-to as carefully as she could, so as not to make a sound. She had prised open the hanging loose plank, making a gap between the wooden boards. Wary not to mark her school clothes, Farah had pulled over a discarded piece of paper to kneel on and gleefully nestled down to, once again, watch Amir.

Surreptitiously, enthusiastically, Farah observed the sweet morning light as it playfully kissed Amir's toned body, lightly caressing him and alternately revealing his skin—golden in the morning shafts of light, then warm chocolate as he moved slightly into shadow. Amir stirred, pulling and pushing at his bread, his hard shiny muscles flexing and relaxing as he energetically twisted the dough before him.

Good grief, said Syafiqah to herself ... and continued.

Next door, but a fluttering heartbeat or two away, the kampong corner shop was beginning to stir. The gnarled, ancient owner could be heard treading the wooden floorboards, almost dragging his slippers feet with his aged step, then unlatching the shop door from the inside, there was a sharp 'clink' as the rusted metal arm hit the top of the protective metal sleeve and 'clunk', as it fell.

Frozen with anticipation, Farah could hear the store owner moving back inside his shop, heading towards the now whistling kettle blowing its head of steam into the waiting morning. He needed to tend to the preparations for his customers' morning tea, as soon, if Farah dallied too long, the shop owner's customers would be milling around inside and outside of the kopi shop, too close to where she knelt for her comfort ... and her reputation.

Sleek Amir breathed a little more deeply at his work. Flexing his slender,

toned arm muscles, Amir plunged his strong brown hands deep into the resisting dough, pulling and stretching at the dough for as hard and as long as he could last.

Without pause, he pummeled the dough with practised, energetic fists, elbowing the dough with swift strong motions, twisting and manipulating the dough until, eventually, he was forced, momentarily, to stop, to take breath, glowing like a wrestler, sweat running in tiny rivulets down his smooth back.

Turning on the electric fan for a little air, Syafiqah eagerly read on.

*Amir straightened to ease his back muscles. Suddenly, he thrust his head back, tensing, then releasing, tensing, then releasing the taut muscles at the back of his neck. Just for a second, Farah fantasised about Amir's head movement, imagining it as mimicking that of an Indian starlet's as she whipped her wet black hair back in an arc, the slight sweat in Amir's hair resembling water spraying in some passionate, romantic South Indian film, to the weighty rhythm of a Tamil music director. Amir's neatly cropped hair, however, was not the luscious tresses of a film starlet. But to Farah's eyes, his gesture echoed the sheer poetry of the *filmi* moment perfectly.*

Next, putting his hands on the top of his dhoti at his waist, thumbs to the rear while his fingers faced forward, Amir leaned backward and pushed gently but firmly against his back muscles, then repeated the same exercise forward, then to the right, and to the left, stretching and easing his muscles as he did so. There was a feline grace and choreography to his movements, and somewhere, deep inside, he was no longer Amir, son of Hussain, maker of roti canai, but the sprightly satyr Prabhu Deva dancing to the lyrical strains of 'Urvashi Urvashi' by the maestro A. R. Rahman.

Prabhu Deva? Ah yes, Mak used to like him, but Michael Jackson was better. Syafiqah continued reading.

Witnessing the beauty and grace of the young Amir's movements,

breathing in achingly short gasps, Farah's budding teen chest rose and fell in helpless excitement. She pressed her young soft hand against her moist mouth, tasting the saltiness of her fingers as she tried to stifle her little involuntary cries, terrified lest the object of her awe hear her. Farah, inextricably caught between the wantonness of her nascent desire and her very real need for caution, found that she was unable to tear her eyes away from the movements of the exquisite Indian.

Guiltily, Syafiqah turned towards the door, checking to see that she had bolted it. She was excited, but a little wary too, lest her mother see what she was reading. Syafiqah had the distinct feeling that her mother would not approve. She turned her eyes back to the page she was reading.

The mesmerised girl watched the delicious boy as xanthous yellow light played across his graceful, sensuous, moving body. Pressing her eager eye against the hole made in the wood, as silently as she was able, Farah observed as Amir fluidly glided to music of sensuous beats obviously sounding only in his own head. Farah, if she had not been delectably awestruck before, was now as her eyes drank in Amir's all but silent dance performance.

Ignoring the fact that 'xanthous' was not in her English dictionary, Syafiqah skipped over the word intending to look it up on the Internet, at school. She did not want to stop the flow of her reading worrying about strange, exotic-sounding words.

The minute sounds of Amir's naked feet on the floor, a gentle whoosh of air as his arm swept, in waves, in circles, was all the accompaniment there was to his satyr dance, and all Farah needed to be caught by his beauty and style. For those few minutes, she was in the thrall of glamour, beguiled by the Indian, fascinated by him.

Farah did not understand her feeling of longing. It had never been a part of her repertoire of feelings; until now. After sixteen and a half years,

her body had reached puberty (and beyond) almost before she had realized what was taking place. It was only the obvious tell-tale signs of needing to wear a towel at certain times of the month, a little extra down in personal, private places, and the blossoming of her breasts which alerted her to her changing status.

Now, noting Amir's silent dance, Farah felt warmth expanding inside her, changing her, perhaps forever. It was only while looking at this young Indian that Farah had any inkling of the woman she may yet become, sometime in her future.

If it had not been so embarrassing, the sudden warmth she experienced between her thighs and the unexpected tightening of her chest beneath her school uniform might have overwhelmed her as she watched the perfection of Amir's silent dance.

As it was, her cheeks coloured with a blush, she felt her face become heated. Slowly, Farah tentatively put one hand beneath her school uniform to see if she bled; she did not. The sudden warmth was not that of her monthlys, so her fingers came away clear ... but sticky, as she involuntarily sighed a world-changing sigh, tingling a little with a small tremor of aftershock.

Syafiqah stared at the book page, and then read the paragraph over again. 'Coo,' she said quietly to herself. Then she read it for a third time, just in case she had misread it the other two times. 'Phew,' she said as she read on.

To Farah, her sensations were not at all unpleasant, just inexplicable. She had neither the words nor the experience to describe what she was beginning to feel. She was certain that she no longer felt like the child she had been, but something else. Farah watched, and as she watched, she grew. As she watched, she gasped, a soft almost sensual gasp, a pretty gasp entirely suited to her young, inexperienced years.

It was a sharp intake of breath, a brief moment of inhalation, which in

itself was paltry but summed up all her feelings and sensations at that very moment in time. That gasp reflected Farah's myriad of feelings, thoughts, sensations, all new, all unnamed, awaiting her recognition. The gasp was the recognition.

Syafiqah stared at the book. Her heart was racing; she was scared and excited, scared to be caught reading such material, but also more than a little excited by the words. Once more, she checked the door, then turned to her bedroom window and made sure that the curtains were closed. With her heart sounding in her ear, she read more.

Catching his breath from his labours, Amir patted the dough with hands shining like gold in the lean-to's brightening light. Then, when he was ready, he turned towards the rear of the shack and smiled a broad smile right to the spot where Farah was watching.

Farah, shocked, embarrassed, but with a small charge of excited electricity shooting through her body, shyly moved back from her spy-hole. As she did so, she stumbled and fell. Farah's careless tumble caused the loose plank to fall, and the one next to it also. Ungracefully, Farah tumbled into the half-light of the wooden lean-to, her skirt in distinct disarray, revealing the curvature of her calves. A breathless, panting Farah landed almost at Amir's feet. To him, as he gazed at her, it was as if Aishwayra Rai herself had tumbled magically into his domain. Smiling, the glistening Amir reached a hand down to her ...

That was it.

As Syafiqah read, she noticed that the page opposite the one she was on had been torn out. The numbering jumped from page 82, the page she was on, to page 85. It was obvious to her that the story ended somewhere between those pages, and there was more than a little disappointment showing in her face with this momentous realisation. With some annoyance, Syafiqah

sellotaped the yellowing fragment of book to the base of her bottom drawer in her chest of drawers, believing it to be safe there.

Later, as Syafiqah was at the back of the kitchen, helping her mother place the pinching pegs out onto the rinsed washing, on their makeshift washing line, she turned to the older woman.

‘Mak,’

‘Yes Adik,’

‘Where can I get a copy of an old book?’

About the author:

Yusuf Martin was born in London, lived in India and settled in rural Malaysia amidst the water buffalo and civets. He read philosophy, Art History and Gallery Studies at the University of Essex, and has worked variously as a horse groom, bookbinder, dustman, street sweeper, night porter, graphic designer, social worker, exhibitions curator and now – writer of sorts. He has been a guest writer in a Singapore literary festival and guest writer at the New Delhi Commonwealth Literary Festival, both in 2010, - his first two novels await publication.

Naked Screw

Alison Lester, Singapore

My apartment in Singapore is immaculate. All the walls are clean and white, except for the one with the naked screw sticking out of it, where I took the wedding photo down. I'm the one who took the picture down; I know what that screw is doing there. But every day it catches my eye, and my brain needs to reassure itself again that the aberration on the wall isn't a threat, a spider or a cockroach, a thing-that-shouldn't-be-there. The broad windows sparkle, the pale grey-and-white marble floor shines so well it reflects perfect rectangles of sky. Now and then, the Singapore Air Force flies its planes overhead, and the reflection of the tiny fighters mimics running cockroaches so well I always speed over to see if I need to stamp on them, just in case.

Once, the shouldn't-be-there thing was bigger. Much bigger.

I'd had my swim and my shower, and was making my usual undressed trip from my bedroom to my kitchen for some juice and yoghurt. I enjoy the cold marble on my feet and the hot sun on my belly and butt as I move through the room. I like to air-dry.

I'd forgotten the building was being painted. Three dark men, South Indians or maybe Bangladeshis, were standing on a suspended platform, staring at me through my living room window. I stopped to think: go to kitchen for food but get stuck there until they descend to paint the lower

floors? Or retreat to bedroom and return clothed but still naked in their eyes?

I turned and retreated, but I'd had a good look at them in my moment of indecision. One was so shocked his heavy lower lip hung open, practically flapping in the breeze. One looked wicked to the core. One stared calmly, apparently unruffled, with something just a little fierce around the eyes. As I walked back into the bedroom I felt a strange urge to let these three chocolate men in through the window, into the refrigerated air of my home, so that they wouldn't melt.

I dressed in a khaki skirt and T-shirt and crossed the living room again, aware of the men's shapes suspended behind the couch but not looking at them. Once in the kitchen, I fought the urge to close the door, since I couldn't stay there forever. The alternative was to close the living room curtains. I spooned out my yoghurt and poured my juice, left the kitchen to put them on the dining table, and crossed the living room to the window. I went to the corner where the curtain begins and pulled it across. When I arrived in front of the painters though, I had to stop.

I'd never come this close to a foreign labourer before, window or no window. I'd bought vegetables and ginger from shopkeepers in Little India, but those Indians weren't new to Singapore, or temporary. My gas man is a Chinese Singaporean named Jacky Chan, who complains of having no girlfriends while the movie star has so many. My plumber is a Malay Singaporean named Rosli, who prays in the mosque near my apartment and appears to have no idea that his ring tone is actually the tune to *Hava Negila*.

I pass foreign labourers in the car and glimpse them digging roadside ditches or pruning the magnificent fecund trees that divide Singapore's expressways. In the evening rush hour, I see them being returned to their sleeping quarters in the backs of open trucks, even when it rains. They have the richest, silkiest hair in the country, and the best hairstyles. They have the

roundest muscles. They trump the bespectacled locals for sex appeal. But we don't meet, and we don't talk.

They were so funny, this trio of strangers with paintbrushes. They were working on the stretch of stone under the window, so I could see them from their shoulders up, and their heads were roughly level with my breasts. That's where Mr Flappy Mouth was looking. The devil in the middle was talking, smiling, flashing his white teeth, gesticulating; I understood he was trying to convince me not to close the curtain. The third worker continued to consider me calmly. Even when I looked him straight in the eye.

He's the one who came to the door at lunchtime.

He didn't take off his shoes and make 'may-I-come in?' motions. He stood and stared at me again.

"Hello," I said.

"You offend me," he said. "I am a married man."

"What? It's *my* apartment."

"Cover yourself," he said.

"I *am* covered."

"Cover yourself all day," he said. "Every day. Everywhere." Then he turned to walk back to the elevator. Turning around released the body odour from his clothes. He stank so badly it made my nose itch. It wasn't a street-person stink; it was stewed spices and garlic oozing through his skin on waves of sweat. It touched me that he held his head so high while smelling like he was fermenting.

"Wait a minute," I demanded, wanting revenge.

He turned.

"Was your marriage arranged?"

He nodded.

"Were you allowed to see your wife before you married her?"

“No.”

“Wouldn’t it have been nice to see her through a window first?”

His head started back as if I had thrust something at him—a snake, or a burning torch—and he turned the corner.

As I prepared my seminar outline that afternoon—I give a kick-ass workshop entitled “PowerPoint Perfection”—I kept thinking about the guys at the window. They live so far from their families if they are married and from potential partners if they are not. I just assumed that they were constantly randy. You can easily get that impression from their curly eyelashes and proud noses. They look imperious, ready to command a woman’s favour, even as they inhabit the lowest of the lower echelons of Singapore’s workers.

I never expected to be anything less than desired, particularly by guys from the sub-continent. Hindi movies make it clear that they’re not afraid of the bigger girl. And now here’s this guy telling me I’ve got it wrong. All afternoon, as I was getting the timing right on the section of my presentation entitled ‘Understanding the Human Attention Span’, I was thinking this guy must, from time to time, let his mind travel beyond the shores of his wife’s body. But I made myself drop the subject when it started feeling like that clichéd argument you listen to at every third or fourth cocktail party in Singapore, the one about the superiority of arranged marriages or love marriages. Not only are these discussions boring, but I’m divorced so I’ve got no leg to stand on in either camp.

I didn’t plan to pursue the subject, with myself or anyone else, but in the early afternoon of the next day, I was walking back to my building from the parking lot when I passed the trio from my window napping on newspapers on the grass by the entrance. Well, the other two were napping. The offended one had his eyes open, and I stopped and looked down into them. I wondered if he’d been thinking about me.

“Why are you not married?” he asked after a moment.

I thought about it. “I’m too tall,” I told him.

He laughed. He actually guffawed. The wicked one’s eyes rolled a little, but he didn’t wake up. Mr Flappy kept on drooling into the sports section.

“Aren’t you lonely?” he asked. His consonants sounded as if he were bouncing them off rubber.

“Not really. Aren’t you?”

His face clouded over, and he looked away.

“Maybe you have pictures of your wife with you.”

He shook his head slightly.

“What about of other women?”

“Stop,” he said, and turned onto his side, facing away from me. Like my husband used to, at the end of a bad day.

I went inside. I hadn’t swum that morning because I’d been in meetings, pitching my workshop, so I hurried back downstairs in my Speedo, testing myself to see whether walking past him in a swimsuit and towel would make me feel ashamed.

He wasn’t there, which made me angry. I did twice as many laps as usual, took a bath, and had a cup of tea standing naked at the living room window.

Once I’d calmed down, though, I was ready to let it go again. He and the boys moved on to Block D, I shot up to Hong Kong to deliver my two-day intensive seminar to the sales team of a major clothing manufacturer, our paths didn’t cross. Then, when I got back, I saw him, coming out of the men’s toilet by the pool as I was approaching to do laps. When he saw me, he looked like he wanted to turn around, but pulled himself together. We walked toward each other and stopped.

“Hello,” I said. I had wanted to sound a bit cold, but it came out warm.

I was happy to see him.

“Hello.”

“Nearly finished with the painting?”

“No. It is ongoing,” he said formally.

“That’s work, isn’t it? It goes on.”

“You are not working.”

“I do work.”

“Sometimes.”

“It pays nicely. And I’m only supporting myself.”

“You are completely alone.”

“With my thoughts.”

He nearly smiled. We were quiet for so long that we either had to say goodbye or open a new subject.

“You went to university, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Technical college.”

“And what did you study?”

“Electricity.”

“Uh-huh? So, tell me, when you were studying, did they give you diagrams of electrical connections to help you understand?”

“Of course.”

“Pictures of women also help you understand.”

If his skin hadn’t been so dark, I’m sure I would have seen him colour in anger.

“We were having a nice conversation. Why did you ruin it?”

“We were having a boring conversation,” I said. “Think about it. Excuse me.”

I went around him and padded over to the pool. As I dove in and started to pull myself through the water, I had to wonder if I shouldn’t be a bit more

respectful of his culture, a little more gentle with his sensibilities. But a few laps later I concluded that I was really thinking of his wife. I married a prude myself. They need lessons.

I was ready, then, when he appeared at the end of the pool as I approached for a turn. I stopped, and he asked me, looking straight down his nose, "What is it you want?"

I told him without hesitation: "I want to be your sexy photos."

He looked confused.

"Like in a magazine?" I said. "Do you understand what I mean?"

"I understand. I understand," he said. Then he turned and left, pulling at his lip, looking at the ground.

"Wait!" I shouted.

He stopped without looking around.

"More like in a temple. Like in a Tantric temple."

He turned his head to speak to me over his shoulder.

"You know Tantra?"

"I went to an exhibit in a museum. I went twice actually." It was a few seconds before he walked off again.

I was so excited by what I was proposing that I swam for longer than usual again. It wasn't until I got in the elevator to go back home that I felt like the complete idiot I was. The headline behind my eyes read: SUPER-SIZED WHITE WOMAN OFFERS EDUCATION AND INSPIRATION TO INDIAN ELECTRICIAN, under which hung the tag line: *He's studied the Kama Sutra, lets her down lightly.* I was red with horror at myself from forehead to shoulders by the time I closed my apartment door behind me. I should stick to multimedia presentations. I should go back to the States where we're all as full of ourselves as I am.

And then the doorbell rings. This time I'm not at all prepared that it's

him; I'm sure I look just like his pal Mr Flappy when I open the door.

“Okay,” he says.

“Okay?”

He nods.

A beatific image forms itself in my head, and I know what to do. “Follow me,” I tell him, and lead him to the bathroom.

My bathroom is small, but pretty. You enter through narrow double doors and are facing the sink and mirror. Next to the sink is the toilet. If you sit on the toilet, you are facing the shower, which has two walls of tile and two walls of Plexiglas. I ask the painter to wait outside the door until I’m ready, and close the doors behind me.

Once I’ve stripped off my swimsuit, I brush out my wet hair so that it hangs down my back, and feel the need to adorn myself. I remember the Tantric statues at the Smithsonian—not only for their buxom figures, their hips cocked to rock against their consorts, and their peaceful, joyful eyes—but also for the detail of their accessories. They were garlanded, with strings of beads or flowers which rested on the upper slopes of their breasts and hung around their rounded bellies, below the navel and above the yoni. I’ve never in my life seen stone breathe so forcefully.

I start putting on my jewellery, all of it. All my rings, all my bracelets, all my necklaces, pearls, Swarovski, gold and silver chains, and a long, green, beaded belt which I tie around my hips, the feel of which excites me more than a hand could right then.

I step into the shower, then tell him he can come in.

The painter sees where I am and comes to stand in front of the toilet, just a few feet from me. I’m a little nervous, but before I turn on the water, I remember what I teach all my clients about delivering their presentation with confidence and commitment. I look him straight in the eye, surprised to see

that this is where he is staring at me as well. I hold up my hands so that he will focus on them, then lay them on my neck and glide them down my body, over my breasts and belly, just as I would have if I'd been allowed to touch the museum sculptures I desired so much.

When I turn the water on, I keep it tepid so that the Plexiglas won't steam up and obscure me. The cool water assures that my nipples will stay erect and my breasts rounded. I soap myself luxuriously but naturally, thinking more of my own pleasure than of his, teaching him about women, about women alone. Then I take the showerhead off its hook to rinse myself. I pull my left leg up and press my knee against the wall, opening myself completely for view. For the first time in my life, I'm convinced beyond any doubt that my pussy is something sacred, something to be adored, worthy of sculpture and ceremony.

The painter thinks so as well. He sits on the toilet seat and opens his trousers, untangling his hard-on from his flimsy boxer shorts and letting his cock stand on view, like a statue, like me, before starting to stroke himself. He watches as I move the showerhead all over my head and body. I want to touch myself as well, but I don't. The sculptures don't, so I don't. They just look healthy and contented, so I am too.

The painter's climax is a quiet event. I know that when I experience the pleasure of climax, my face shows pain. Ecstasy as excruciation. But his face remains calm, and his eyes stay on my body.

Whatever he feels when he comes, I certainly feel released from something.

While he cleans himself up, I turn off the shower and stand inside it, the light sparkling on the wet links and crystals, until he is finished. He fastens his trousers again, and stands in front of me with the clear door between us.

"Thank you," he says seriously, just like a student would, and leaves.

Once I'm dry and wrapped in my towel, I go out to the living room, but he's gone.

I don't expect to see the painter again, and I don't mind. He turned out to be a should-be-there thing. Like the screw. It's an aberration, but it's useful. I can put up a new picture whenever I want.

About the author:

Alison Jean Lester is author of *Locked Out: Stories Far from Home*, a collection of short stories largely set in Asia. While not focusing specifically on erotica, the sexual lives of her characters very often play an important role in her stories. She has lived in the US, the UK, China, Italy, Taiwan, and Japan, and now makes her home in Singapore.

Body Drafts

Rachel Loh, Singapore

After removing her bra, Michelle slowly slipped off her more reluctant panties, then stood there holding both. She looked over at Dr Narain sheepishly, the underwear dangling from her hand.

“Anywhere,” Narain said with a generous shrug. “Just throw them over there.”

Michelle turned and tossed first the bra, then the panties onto a tawny brown plush chair squeezed next to the bedroom dresser. She then turned back to Dr Narain, arms folded lengthwise across her front, as if to attempting to cover her breasts and crotch—though very little of either was covered.

“It’s more comfortable here than in my office, isn’t it?” said Dr Narain. “Not as cold, I think.” A knowing smile filtered in. “In any sense.”

“Yes,” Michelle giggled. “It is much more comfortable here. Very much.” She laughed again, then let her arms fall to her sides. After all, this was hardly the first time Narain had seen her naked body. The only difference was that this time they were in the doctor’s bedroom, not the office. After exchanging conspiratorial smiles with Narain, Michelle folded her arms behind her back, shifted her feet, threw her head back and posed, showing off her work-in-progress body.

Narain beamed, stepped forward and started caressing the edges of that

delicate Chinese face, finally streaming skilled fingers through the patient's hair. "Admiring your work?" Michelle asked with a nervous smile.

"Admiring your beauty," Narain replied, with a more confident smile. Michelle closed her eyes and leaned her head back further, allowing Narain to caress her more easily. She did, indeed, feel comfortable in the hands of this doctor. From that very first time she stepped into the office and saw Narain, she felt surprisingly at ease, glad that she had taken her friend Tania's advice and sought out this particular specialist.

Michelle had been going to Dr Narain for just over a year now. She had started with botox treatments, then went on to collagen infusions, before moving up to minor surgery to give her the double eyelid that all affluent Asian women seem required to sport these days. Only recently had she decided to ask Narain about more radical procedures: body sculpting, breast enlargement, vaginal tightening. Though still anxious about this next stage, she was nonetheless determined to press ahead with it.

Narain had moved from stroking Michelle's hair and face and was now skimming the tips of well-trained fingers across the patient's neck. "Yes, you can use a little bit of work here. Don't worry, we'll get these lines gone completely. Very simple. We can do it next week at the office, if you like."

"Botox?" Michelle asked. Narain gave another generous, reassuring smile, along with a shake of the head. "No, that won't work here. What we're looking at is just a short deep laser treatment. Fifteen minutes, tops, for this lovely neck of yours. And no down time really."

Michelle nodded, just as Narain started grazing fingers lightly over her shoulders, before slowly easing them down to the outer curve of her breasts. Michelle again closed her eyes and took long, deep breaths.

"I think your breasts are just ... wonderful," Narain told her. "They are *so* right for you. Why so many women here want those big, lumpy Western

appendages, like the things poor Pamela Anderson has to struggle around with, I just don't understand. It's terrible."

"Yes, I agree, Doctor. But my husband says they're too small—especially for the wife of someone in his position. He'd like something a little closer to Pamela's problem." During this exchange, Narain's hands had cupped Michelle's petite breasts and were now fondling them gently, working the palms dexterously along the soft, pliant curves.

"Well then, whatever ... But like I've told you already, I think your husband is an absolute idiot." For emphasis on this point, Narain started fondling the breasts with vigour. Michelle breathed deeply, bit her lower lip, then whispered out her reply.

"You are absolutely right. He is an idiot, A-list idiot actually, but he pays all the bills. Including all your bills."

"For which, I am eternally grateful," Narain answered, then leaned over and placed an eager mouth to Michelle's nipples. First, the doctor's lips gently grazed against the broad aureole and nipples, already hardened, before an ardent tongue started flicking against them. Soon, lips and tongue both began sucking in soft, measured pulls, as Michelle eagerly lost control.

She started running her hands wildly through the dark tangles of Narain's hair, then, as Narain nuzzled upwards and started planting deep kisses on the neck, she dropped her hands to the doctor's hips and rubbed vigorously, before gliding the hands around to clutch Narain's well-toned butt. Narain responded instantly: the doctor's crotch was pressed tightly against Michelle's. As Narain took Michelle's face and the two kissed fully on the mouth, their loins started grinding rhythmically against each other. Then, as the tongues lashed in slow swirls upon each other, the twists of the loins grew longer, slower, more charged with purpose.

When they broke to seize a few breaths, Michelle gave a light push and

stepped back. “Maybe we’d better change tactics here, or you’re going to have to rush those pants of yours right over to the dry-cleaners. And I have no idea how easy it is to get out those kinds of spots.”

Narain again flashed that soft, reassuring smile. “To hell with it: I’ll just keep them as a souvenir of a very wonderful time in my life.” As Michelle grinned shyly, Narain leaned over and planted a quick, affectionate kiss on her lips. “But you’re right; it is unfair that I’m always ‘in uniform’ while you’re in various stages of undress.” The doctor then turned and indicated the bed with a theatrical flourish of the hand. “Anyway, it’s time we moved on to the next phase of the examination. So … shall we move to the … examination table, Mrs Tay?”

With an enthusiastic nod, Michelle padded over to the bed. Narain, already barefoot, followed just behind.

“Oh, I really like this examination table,” Michelle said, climbing onto the bed and sitting up, as her shapely legs (no work needed there) slid back and forth along the length of the bed. “Especially the 40-thread cotton sheets you’ve got on it.” Narain nodded. “Much better than those cold, metal stirrups in your office.”

“All in the interests of making the patient more comfortable, of course,” Narain said, starting to undo those pants Michelle had been so concerned about.

“Of course,” Michelle echoed, watching captivated as the doctor shed the other articles of clothing. Within moments, all of Narain’s clothing had been dropped to the floor, and the doctor spread both arms out like wings, showing off that very enviable body.

Although they’d had sort-of-sex several times in the surgery office, Michelle had never before seen Narain completely naked. She now found herself thoroughly aroused by the doctor’s well-sculpted form.

“God, you’ve got a great body there.” She smiled impishly, like a schoolgirl having happened upon an adult’s locked-up secret. “Did you go under the knife yourself to get there? Or get lasered, or whatever you can do these days?”

“That, my dear, is a professional secret. It would be a gross violation of the plastic surgeon’s code to reveal such details about a patient—any patient.”

Michelle laughed. “And isn’t it maybe a teensy, weensy violation of the surgeon’s code to have sex with a patient—one still undergoing treatment?”

“Hmm,” replied Narain, “Now that you mention it, I think there is something about that in the code. But we don’t want to violate too many parts of the code all at once now, do we?”

Narain had by this point shuffled to the edge of the bed. Reaching down with the skill, tact and delicacy of a doctor starting a probe, Narain took Michelle’s right foot, raised it about six inches, then—while staring right into her eyes—started stroking the sole. “Now, what about these? Is your husband satisfied with your feet?” Narain started running two deft fingers along the easy curve of the foot. “Sure he doesn’t want the arches raised a little, perhaps lowered a little?”

“No, I think he’s fine with the feet,” Michelle answered, as her eyelids slid closed in enjoyment of this impromptu massage.

“Oh really? So he doesn’t want me to add a few dimples to the toes? Make them even more delectable?” At this, the doctor raised Michelle’s foot slightly higher and started sucking on those toes. This sent Michelle into a slow spin of ecstasy, which only intensified as Narain turned the foot gently and started slowly licking the sole. The doctors’ tongue flowed along the pinkish skin, paused to give one spot special treatment, flowed again. In muted rapture, Michelle herself raised the other foot and rubbed it against the doctor, from the strong chin down to just below the waist.

Narain put the two feet together, kissed each one, then slowly lowered them back onto the bed. Michelle looked up with keen anticipation. When Narain answered this look with a feigned quizzical expression, Michelle reached for the doctor. Smiling, Narain took her hand, caressed it, then slipped fully onto the bed, next to her. With head raised, supported by the left arm, the doctor gave a slow, appreciative scrutiny along the entire length of her body. It was clear that Narain took both pride and delight in attending to Michelle and all her needs.

“So, Doctor, do you think there’s hope for me?”

“Oh … much hope; much, much hope,” the surgeon replied, allowing a hand to roll slowly over the slope of Michelle’s thighs. “It’s just a matter of determining what we want and then, you know, setting out the proper body drafts.”

“Body drafts?” Michelle was obviously amused by the term.

“Yes, my darling—body drafts. We examine the basic material, sketch out a working topography, then decide what we wish to create out of that. The actual surgery is the hard part, of course; taking body drafts is much easier and, I have to say, *much* more fulfilling.” At this, Narain leaned over as if to kiss her, but suddenly stopped short and delivered a playful tickle instead.

Michelle, of course, laughed and in the middle of her laughter managed to say, “Alright, Doctor, let’s see how you carry out your drafts.” She pointed a mock warning finger at the beaming face. “And I expect a thorough job here.”

“Of course; you should expect nothing less from me. Let’s see: we can easily sculpt a more svelte curvature here …” the doctor’s hand slid up the thigh, all the way to the place where it met the other, lingering there a few moments “… and here.” Narain now began squeezing the hips, which Michelle had long considered too well padded.

“And there’s no problem at all shaping this luscious part.” Narain had just swung one leg over the patient and was now straddling Michelle as the trained surgeon’s hands did a quick draft of the buttocks, kneading the soft flesh as if about to sculpt it into a splendidly taut masterwork. Michelle elevated her hips slightly, allowing the doctor’s strong fingers to slip in and then run along the crack of the ass from top to bottom. The fingers gently rotated as they made their way down the soft cleft. Like that first time it had happened at the office, Michelle was amazed at how much pleasure she could take from this ‘disgusting’ manoeuvre—when done by someone who obviously knew what they were doing.

Still arched over Michelle’s eager body, supported by elbows and knees, Narain bent down until moistened lips hovered maybe an inch away from the breasts. “And there are just... so many possibilities with these beauties here.” The tongue, the teeth, the lips now swept all over Michelle’s breasts, sending the patient into deeper ecstasy.

“And as for that vaginal tightening your idiot husband wants ...”

“Yes, Doctor, yes-s-s?”

“Well, let’s explore the territory in question.”

As Narain said this, two skilled fingers were already slipping inside Michelle, testing pleasure spots Michelle herself had somehow always neglected until Narain had taught her a month and a half ago. The very willing patient rose slightly and began swivelling on these two fingers as Narain, now repositioned, eased the same two fingers from the other hand in and began rotating vigorously in close rhythm to Michelle’s gyrations.

Her eyes shut tightly, fingers squeezed into Narain’s shoulders, Michelle thrust herself on and around the fingers until, within maybe twenty seconds, she came. Then, clutching the doctor’s wrists, she pushed down, intensifying the pleasure as she swelled into a second orgasm. Oh God, I always come

with Dr Narain, she thought—even those crazy times in the office, where it was so cold and rushed, with a pack of other patients waiting impatiently outside.

Always came. She told herself it was simply because Narain was a doctor, a surgeon trained in handling those most intricate—and intimate—parts of the body that she could ... She didn't dare to try on any other explanation for Narain's unfailing success at bringing her to orgasm. After another few moments, Michelle opened her eyes and peered with a swirl of love-lust at this highly skilled healer.

"And your husband wants this lovely passage tightened?" The doctor's brow furrowed in mock bewilderment. "I don't know. It certainly works for *me*." The fingers started churning around again energetically. "And most important, Michelle darling, it clearly works for you. Oh yes: definitely." The fingers still there inside the patient, Narain bent over to kiss Michelle gently on the lips. As their lips brushed against each other, Michelle grabbed the back of the doctor's head, pulled it in closer and turned that gentle kiss into a long, urgent, passionate embrace.

At the end of the kiss, Narain rose off Michelle slightly, pulling the fingers back until just the tips were still inside. As those tips started rotating gently, Michelle was filled with a fierce urge to give the doctor as much pleasure as she had just taken, more if possible ... yes, more and more—for both of them. More.

In high arousal, she pulled herself up slightly and reached out—reached out to take Dr Narain's breasts, pulling at those gorgeous tits, much larger than her own, then rose and, while still massaging the breasts, started sucking desperately at one dark nipple, then the other. As she sucked, she also moved her left hand to the doctor's own vagina and started stroking along the moist

slit, caressing its cushion of tightly whorled hair.

As Michelle pulled back to see the mounting rapture on her physician's face, she managed to push this larger woman down on her back and whispered, "So, Dr Narain, do you like the taste of your own medicine?"

The doctor put her hand over Michelle's and started pressing hard against it. "Oh yes, yes indeed. I think I'd even enjoy a little overdose, if you don't mind."

By now, Michelle had slipped her own fingers into Narain. She bowed lower and before starting to trace her tongue along the sweet curve of the doctor's lovely left breast, she replied, "Well, we'll give it all we can. But you'll have to tell me if I'm doing everything right. After all, you're the doctor, Dr Narain."

"Please," she murmured, "call me Vivien."

Michelle looked up from the robust mound of the doctor's breasts. "Alright then ... Vivien. You know, Vivien, I'm beginning to see just what you mean about the fun of taking body drafts."

About the author:

Rachel Loh is a discreet pen name for a respected Singapore socialite and media figure. Rachel believes that a writer should explore as many aspects of the human experience as that writer's imagination can reach. Writing erotica is a liberating exercise, this author feels, as it brings all the tools of a writer to some of our deepest expressions of ourselves and our sensibilities.

Eduardo's Honeymoon

Annabel Pagunsan, Philippines

Eduardo Cendrars Queral paid little attention to the usual landing announcements made by the flight crew as the Cebu Pacific Air jet began its descent over Mactan Island, its colourful yellow-and-orange livery flashing brightly in the tropical sunshine.

The Spaniard was more interested in watching Mi-chan's reactions to the sea of green that was becoming visible as the plane began to descend below the clouds. Her hand was resting on his thigh, hidden by the salmon-pink newsprint of the financial paper which he had lowered rather quickly over his lap when, at 25,000 feet, she had begun to worry and tease the head of his *batuta* with her elegant fingers.

His feet in their dark socks were still locked discreetly around one of her ankles; a delicate bare sole was pressed against his instep, exciting him even more than her pretty toes, which were curling softly as she caressed his foot lazily with them.

They were not the only couple on the flight in that kind of mood. After all, Cebu was a popular honeymoon destination, and the flight from Singapore was carrying the usual numbers of foreign newlyweds in every row.

However, Eduardo's honeymoon in Cebu was not going to be a typical tourist's *luna de miel*, either. For the first time in his life, he was bringing a

wife to meet the Filipino side of the family. He was well into his forties, lean, and worldly; Mi-chan was only 23, and even more worldly than he was.

He was proud of her, and not only on account of her exotic Eurasian features and her pornographic curves; she had been educated well by the cousin who had raised her after she was orphaned. However, he had been thinking of the Filipino saying *may tainga ang lupa, may pakpak ang balita* even before they boarded the aircraft. ‘The earth itself has ears, and gossip has wings.’

For his bride was gloriously and healthily pregnant, already in her second trimester, and the first time the family had ever heard of her was approximately three weeks previously, when he had telephoned his grandfather in Cebu to inform him that he was about to enter into a civil marriage with a young Frenchwoman who lived in Singapore.

Acting on a gut feeling, Eduardo had taken a deep breath and mentioned to his *lolo* that Mi-chan was very young, and was rather obviously *embarazada*; at least four months along, to be precise.

* * *

The grandfather they were going to visit in Cebu was a *tisoy*, the local term for a *mestizo* of European descent. Although the Filipino side of the family did not import their brides from Spain by design, a family tradition of sending the sons to the Old World for their education had meant that most of the men—including Eduardo’s father and even the grandfather in Cebu—had chosen their wives from good Castilian, Basque or Catalan families in Spain.

Eduardo was a Spanish Filipino whose eyes were such a deep shade of blue that they looked almost violet; his looks were utterly Castilian. Although he still thought and dreamed in Spanish, and did most of his business in

English or Japanese, his fluency in Cebuano and Ilonggo was well appreciated in the Philippines, where most of his workforce was based. His core business trained and employed dozens of talented local illustrators who worked on the animated feature films he produced with his Japanese partner.

* * *

Mi-chan had never visited the Philippines before, despite the fact that she had been living in Southeast Asia for nearly three years. After the prim efficiency of her adopted city of Singapore, she found herself enjoying the untidy bustle of Cebu-Mactan International Airport. Eduardo used his burgundy EU passport, instead of the maroon one issued by the Republika ng Pilipinas, so that he could be in the same queue as his wife.

Most of the passengers who had been on their flight were met by hotel staff in the airport terminal and herded into minibuses and hotel cars within a matter of minutes. Eduardo was queuing up patiently at the car rental booth when he was approached by a cheerful young Filipino who addressed him by name.

The man's name was Fidel. Smiling, Fidel greeted Mi-chan politely before saying, 'Sir Eduardo, your *lolo* wants me to drive you and Ma'am Ayumi to the house. He said to tell you that he doesn't trust your driving.'

Eduardo was bewildered, but understood perfectly when the driver continued, 'And he also asked me to tell you that your brother Juan Carlos and Ma'am Christine arrived the day before yesterday.'

The Spaniard shot a sympathetic look at Fidel, and asked him a pithy question in the Cebuano dialect, 'I suppose my brother's wife is in ... the usual form?'

'Oh yes, Sir,' was the young man's sunny reply.

* * *

The grandfather had asked to receive them privately in his study before they saw to any other family business—such as the complicated, and very public, distribution of *pasalubong*, the obligatory presents expected of any Filipino returning home. Mi-chan had brought him a fine hand-turned Danish pipe which she had purchased in Singapore.

Mi-chan watched her husband greet his *lolo* respectfully by making a slight bow over the back of the man's right hand, until the knuckles grazed his forehead. Acting on instinct, she copied the *mano po*, and received a very proper but affectionate *bisou* on each cheek from the grandfather in return.

At 92, Old Man Queral was a charmer. He also had an impish style about him which she had never detected in the grandson, who had a taste for aggressive martial arts, tended to take everything very seriously, and had certain rather dark hungers in the bedroom which some women might find intimidating.

Addressing his new granddaughter-in-law, the *lolo* said, 'My dear, let me give you my blessings for your marriage to my grandson. He is a lucky man. I understand that your parents are no longer living. I will do my best to make sure that their souls are at ease as long as you are here under my roof.'

He continued, 'I have explained to the family—especially the *titas*, who are anxious to meet you—that you are an expectant mother, and may want to rest until the *meryenda* at 4.30pm. The *pasalubong* and the introductions can wait, no?'

The *lolo* took Ayumi's hand and said, 'Thank you for the pipe, it is such a good one. Mrs Hizon has set out some refreshments in your room in case you get hungry or thirsty.'

* * *

The room which had been assigned to them was one of the most romantic rooms in the colonial-style *bahay na bato*—or ‘house of stone’. That part of the house was so old that the afternoon light filtered into the room through panes made from translucent *capiz* shells, *ventanillas* carved from Philippine hardwoods, and colourful sheets of speckled glass.

Mi-chan lay back contentedly on the big four-poster bed and allowed her husband to remove her sandals and pull her panties down towards her ankles. He left on the confining Japanese *hara-obi* bindings which she insisted on winding tightly around her midriff after every bath in order to support the ever-growing bump and her lower back.

Eduardo’s sexual hunger liquefied his wife’s spine when he forced her young thighs apart with his knee and began to push the heavy head of his cock into her *kiki*, which was hot and fluid from the hormones.

The belly was high and narrow, in that modern way; soon he had her on her side, with her thighs parted widely and the bump pressed safely to the side, and was thrusting into her in a rough rhythm which made her full breasts roll heavily into his hands as he smacked his hips against her buttocks and her thighs.

One of his hands gripped her ankle and pulled it back in order to open her up more as he ploughed her young body with his *batuta*, a Spanish Filipino word meaning ‘baton’.

In the gentle tropical heat of the afternoon—which was kept comfortably at bay by one ageing air-conditioning unit that juddered every few minutes as it kept the bedroom well-chilled, in true Filipino style—Mi-chan moaned softly as her husband made love to her. At one point, the *butiki*—house

geckos—scurrying silently along the walls and across the ceilings watched Eduardo strip the pregnancy girdle from his wife's midriff and use that to tie her to the bedposts.

After the sex, Mi-chan sat quietly on a low stool in the simple old-fashioned bathroom as Eduardo lathered their bodies up with a bar of soap and rinsed the suds off, Filipino-style, with big scoops of fresh water from a large earthenware jar fed by a plastic hose attached directly to the faucet.

The slippery feel of her warm soapy body under his hands brought the Spaniard's *dako* back to life yet again, and Mi-chan was quite happy to find herself being eased, monkey-style, onto a very clean penis which spread her buttocks as her husband asserted his conjugal rights on the cool bathroom tiles.

* * *

The *meryenda* was Ayumi's formal introduction to the family. In Spain, a *merienda* was a simple affair, a piece of fruit and some toast or pastries served with coffee or tea just before sundown.

In Old Man Queral's household, this snack was a substantial meal, Filipino style, with custard tarts, Chinese meat buns, a healthy selection of fresh tropical fruit, and even a steaming dish of fried *pancit* noodles. Although sundown was still a couple of hours away, both he and Eduardo accepted the tumblers of whiskey offered to them by the staff; Mi-chan sipped a glass of young coconut juice.

Eduardo's brother Juan Carlos looked longingly at the drinks tray, but settled on a glass of fresh pineapple juice after a sharp remark from his wife. The servants were all aware that Juan Carlos was living *under the saya*, although they would never dream of expressing those views in so many

words. To say, even jokingly, that a man lived under his woman's skirts—her *saya*—was quite a serious insult in the Philippines.

Christine was the kind of Frenchwoman for whom the air-conditioning in Cebu was never cold enough and for whom the staff never moved quickly enough. She and Juan Carlos lived in France; the only thing she enjoyed about visiting the *hacienda* in Cebu was having a large staff to boss about.

Old Man Queral often wondered why Christine was so imperious and demanding with his staff when, in France, she washed her own clothes and relied on a cleaner who came in two days a week. Her behaviour always reminded him of the Phillipine saying 'A fly that lands on a carabao feels itself to be higher than the carabao.'

* * *

The woman began attacking Mi-chan almost as soon as the family was seated around the mango wood table on the patio. During their first meeting only the week before, Juan Carlos had been taught by Eduardo to treat Mi-chan with respect, but his wife was not a fast learner.

Christine's line of attack was the pregnancy. Under the pretext of being happy for Ayumi, she seized every opportunity to draw attention to the healthy size of the bride's stomach, considering that she had been married for only a few weeks. Her remarks injured Eduardo's pride, his *amor proprio*; the Filipino sense of embarrassment and shame, called *hiya*, was deeply ingrained in him.

Mi-chan, who understood the Asian concept of 'face' perfectly, sensed that her husband was not in a position to put Christine in her place without losing even more face. For his sake, she concentrated on maintaining a sweet, calm and respectful demeanour.

Old Man Queral liked the way Mi-chan was holding on to her dignity. Unlike Christine, who was rapidly approaching what Filipino culture calls the *napasubo*, the ominous ‘point of no return’ in social conflict; the aunts, uncles and cousins at the table were already looking embarrassed and uncomfortable.

He had thought well of Eduardo’s young bride from the moment she had greeted him instinctively with a *mano po*, a simple but meaningful gesture which Juan Carlos’ wife had never bothered to perform.

Just as he was about to say something firm to Christine to put a stop to the nonsense once and for all, Mi-chan spoke up. ‘Grandfather, I feel very embarrassed to present myself at your house in this condition.’ She added, wistfully, ‘My stomach is so big. *O-negai shimasu*; I am sorry.’

Her words snapped every head in her direction. Including the household staff. The head of the family raised his glass to his new granddaughter-in-law and smiled at her. ‘*Hija*,’ he said, ‘all that matters to me is that both you and the baby are well. I have never seen my grandson so happy before. And he is no fool.’

In an instant, the old man’s gracious words made Christine’s pointed remarks appear indelicate, and even uncouth. The formal afternoon tea continued without further incident.

* * *

Mi-chan enjoyed her stay at the Spanish-style colonial house where she spent her time getting to know the grandfather who had shaped her husband’s character, and gaining a feel for the rhythms of life in Central Visayas, which was colourful and lush beyond anything she had imagined when she had chosen to make tropical Singapore her home.

The honeymoon in Cebu showed her a side of her husband which she had not known when they were in Europe. He seemed more playful—and, well, *Asian*—in the Philippines, especially when he spoke in Filipino.

She could not bring herself to tease him when, on the very first day of their stay, he had approached her, looking sheepish, and handed her a small cloth pouch containing a knob of ginger and a few coins, which one of the older servants had asked him to keep close to her pillow as protection against the *aswang*, a deadly supernatural creature which is believed to feed on pregnant women and their unborn children after dark.

His lovemaking was sweeter and rougher and deeper in the New World; the long and quiet siesta period every afternoon was always well-used by them. The Japanese pregnancy girdle was unwound every day between two and four in the afternoon. He enjoyed the pregnant sex so much that he even entertained inappropriate thoughts of keeping Mi-chan *embarazada* all the time.

During their honeymoon on the *hacienda*, Eduardo and his new bride went at it like Sikalak and Sikabay, the Adam and Eve of the Visayas creation myth, who made so many babies that the pale-skinned Spanish conquistadors who arrived in the 16th century were initially believed to be the descendants of Aryon, the son who had travelled north to lands so cold that the winds there had blown all good sense out of his head.

* * *

One hot afternoon, a few days into the honeymoon, Mi-chan sent her husband off to play golf with his friends, under the pretext that she needed to rest. Eduardo returned to the house sun-burned and sweaty and happy after 18 holes of golf at the course in Danao City.

He found a note from her on the bed. 'Out shopping with Tita Ernesta. Back at 4.00. See you—Mi-chan.' Grinning, he headed for the shower, leaving the bathroom door ajar so that he could hear his wife letting herself in, exactly 30 minutes later. For she was always punctual, even in the Philippines, where timekeeping was elastic.

Eduardo hummed under the cool water as he soaped himself, feeling very pleased with himself for having been intelligent enough to marry a young woman who had a wise old head on her slim shoulders, and tastes which were such a good match for his hungers. Drying himself off with a towel, he stepped into the bedroom and was so startled to see his wife standing there that he bit his lip.

Mi-chan had her hair in a ponytail, and she was wearing a cheerleader outfit, a very distinctive one in a rich shade of Marian Blue, which he knew well from his days at the Ateneo de Manila—right down to the white shoes and socks. He wondered how she even knew about the famous cheerleaders of his alma mater's *Ateneo Blue Eagles*.

When he approached her, she signalled to him to stop. He obeyed. Hoisting one small, white-clad foot onto a chair, she pretended to adjust a shoelace, exposing a great deal of fair silky thigh and a sliver of navy blue panties.

Smiling naughtily, Mi-chan shocked his stiff penis to full attention by executing a near-perfect *herkie* for him to see. On landing, she took two graceful steps forward, lifted one long leg, and rested a neatly be-socked ankle on his shoulder, allowing the skimpy pleats of her skirt to plunge to her crotch. She was very agile despite the expanding stomach, which was already quite solid and growing by the day.

Kissing his new wife very deeply on the mouth, Eduardo used his hands to rub her between her supple legs over the dark blue cotton of her panties,

lingering at the very damp spot just below her clit.

Mi-chan decided that it was time to progress matters. Removing her ankle from his shoulders, she kept the hungry Spaniard back with one slim arm held straight out, and leaned back until her lovely ass was resting against the edge of the small table where Mrs Hizon had laid out a tray of fruit and tea things.

Eduardo stepped forward very quickly and dropped to his knees in front of her. He was still naked and damp from the shower; he had lost his towel and his solid *pokochin* was pointing straight ahead.

Pulling the panties down those tender thighs, and leaving them beached at her knees, he began to work on his wife with his mouth. Using both thumbs to stretch her sweet baby lips lengthwise, he flicked his tongue firmly along, and even into, the lips which were being pulled gently taut, making her shudder and mew as he ate and drank her hungrily.

Once again, Mi-chan changed gears for both of them. Kicking off her white sneakers, she gripped the sides of his head hard and pushed him and his prickly blue chin back far enough to place one small foot against his chest and push him back onto his heels.

The white sock travelled steadily from his very Spanish chest down to his groin, where she used her foot to play with his *chinchin-san* until *Little Eduardo* was furiously hard. The husband gripped her lower thigh with his hand, making her shiver as he stroked and squeezed the soft back of her knee.

Eduardo broke free of Mi-chan's leg, rising to his feet above her so quickly that he was able to make her gasp sharply by spinning her around and flipping up her tiny skirt. He gripped her firmly with one arm around her waist, trapping her, as he bent her—and that belly of hers—forward over the desk.

He only needed the long fingers of one hand to spread her buttocks; Mi-

chan was always crazy for anal sex. And her sexual hunger was so great these days, in the second trimester, as the hormones heated her skin and turned it to velvet, thickened her hair, and engorged her nipples and the tender membranes between her legs.

As usual, Eduardo paused for a moment to enjoy an intimate look at the woman he was about to take.

And was startled to see something sparkle between his wife's buttocks. He was puzzled for only a few moments.

Pushing his nose and mouth deep between her cheeks, Eduardo prickled and grazed her briefly with his stubble as he worked his teeth around the edges of the small round diamond and platinum stud covering her sphincter.

He tugged gently with his mouth, drawing out a small platinum plug so slowly with his teeth that Ayumi's knees trembled; his hand had moved to the front of her crotch and was very busy there.

Rising to his feet, Eduardo held his wife's chin gently as she received the plug from his mouth, the contact between their lips making him so aroused that he left the jewellery between her teeth, braced his hand across her throat, and felt the vibrations of her moans through his fingers as he pushed his penis deep inside her back entrance.

No lubrication; he barely allowed her the time to adjust to his cock's rude entry before he began to take her with long fast strokes, vaguely aware that the hem of her skirt was brushing against the base of his penis, increasing his pleasure. Eduardo knew that the sounds coming from her were a mixture of a bit of pain and a great deal of pleasure.

The arm around her waist shifted to her chest as the rhythm of his thrusts became quite fierce; Mi-chan was having to rise on tiptoe now with every stroke. The fingers he was keeping between her legs were signalling to him that she was shivering on the verge of a very nice orgasm.

Biting his wife's shoulder hard enough to make her yelp once as she squirmed against that big cock in her butt and began to come, Eduardo swung his hips firmly upwards twice, thrusting roughly between her cheeks as he spurted inside her with such force that he began to feel a slow trickle of himself ooze out between her tightly-stretched muscles and his shaft.

Panting, Eduardo stopped thrusting so that he could enjoy the sensation of his cock throbbing inside her as it softened; both husband and wife could feel the baby kicking. He kissed Mi-chan and thanked her for the nice welcome home.

They had at least one free hour to themselves before they had to dress for the next *meryenda* at the mango wood table on the patio. His heart pounding as if he had just completed a fierce and aggressive session of *kendo* with his Japanese business partner, Eduardo fondled his wife's breasts and listened to the white cockatoos quarrelling and making love outside the finely carved *ventanillas* of the room which was home to both him and Mi-chan during his honeymoon in Cebu. He felt very contented.

About the author:

Annabel Pagunsan is the pseudonym of a Singapore-based author of literary erotica. AP is currently working on the second and third novels in the 'Patrick & Ayumi: Hard-working Slaves' series.

Night at Passion Touch

Hari Kumar, Singapore and India

I open the door of my flat and step into my living room. It suddenly looks small and depressing. And lifeless. In this little slot in the sky, I am nothing more than a claustrophobic pigeon. Depression rules me within these four walls, which seem to be inching closer day by day like a sinister army, a tightening noose. My tiny apartment is known by the number 15–75, which fills me with a deep longing for homes that had names, religions, moods, ghosts, personalities, attitude ... Here the walls creep in, the furniture grows, the air rots and silence splits my head slooowly. My block is a giant filing cabinet. Of people filed away to be forgotten.

In the last few months after my estranged wife Nisha had got this job she would be travelling often, leaving me within these carnivorous walls to get hypnotised by the TV. Not that Nisha was great company; our home had become an art-house movie in the recent months, with monosyllables hanging in the air like the Sumatran haze. But she was a presence nevertheless. She was a scent, a grunt, a flash of colour, a shuffle of feet, a word, an incomplete line ... We spoke through Post-it Notes on the fridge.

When the TV became unbearable I got drawn into the Internet. Like God, I had 108 names in the many chat rooms I stalked. Like God, I could become male, female, genderless. Like God, I felt powerful, omnipotent. But

the topic was always the same. The people were always sick. And the world was such a fake. I soon got sick of it and wondered how anyone could be addicted to this cyber-madness.

Of course, there were the plus points of the Internet, like email and free pornography. But then again, my email account started receiving more and more spam than regular mails. Daily emails promised me fourteen inches of masculinity; all-I-can-eat Viagra; a thousand “sure-fire” ways to make money, lose weight, grow younger, get out of debt, etc. Even the pornography became boring. There are only so many ways the human anatomy can be arranged and juxtaposed. To me, the Internet was just a shooting star.

So when the television and the Internet died their deaths in me, I started wandering after work, in order to avoid the frozen shadows of home as much as possible. I drove past the seedy underbelly of Singapore: places like Geylang, Desker, or Changi Village where the transsexuals were prettier and curvier than the female prostitutes. But that was as far as I could go with those night creatures.

But the massage parlours, “health centres” as they were euphemistically called, were a different thing altogether. Since most of them were located in shopping malls, they bore a façade of respectability. My first such “healthy” experience was in a massage centre in the fourth floor of a shopping mall off Orchard Road. For almost a week, I had been loitering around the mall mustering up the courage to open that door of Passion Touch Health Centre. On that night I had downed two pegs of whiskey at a nearby pub, so I had some courage flowing fast through my veins.

After spending twenty long minutes gazing at the lingerie on a mannequin in a boutique next to the health centre and getting some dirty looks from the boutique’s salesgirl in the process, I held my breath and turned the door knob of Passion Touch. The opening of the door immediately set

off some kind of chime that startled me for a moment and made me want to run away. The brightly lit lobby, though small, was, to my surprise, quite plush and even pleasant. I had expected a dark and dingy place with women hanging in the shadows, smouldering cigarettes between their lips.

The cheerful old lady behind the reception desk was watching a Channel 8 Chinese drama from a small wall-mounted TV beside the door. She looked at me and gave me a very bright, “Hallowelcome.” She opened a register and asked me to write my name and identity card number. I hesitated for a moment, feeling suspicious as to whether this was some kind of a blackmail racket. “No worry, lah,” the lady said, slapping my arm. “You so malu, hor. Everyone write, see. You go any health centre, also write.” She flipped the pages to show me lines and lines of scribbles, most of them unintelligible. I scribbled “D. Nair,” and for my IC number, I jumbled up three digits. Thankfully, she didn’t bother to ask for my identity card.

“You first time, haah?” She gave me a motherly smile.

“First time in Singapore,” I said proudly, pushing out my chest and placing my arms on my hips. “I go London, Paris, New York, Bangkok. Everywhere I go massage,” I said, looking at her over the tip of my nose.

“You tourist, haah?”

I nodded impatiently.

“So how come you have IC number?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Um … I … I … That’s my passport number,” I blurted out finally.

She nodded understandingly, then added, “For tourists, thirty dollars extra, hor. So, seventy dollars.”

I cursed myself under my breath and placed a fifty and two tens on the desk.

“Wait, hor. I call masseuse,” she said, putting on a toothy smile. As I waited, I took a good look at the lobby. In a niche in the wall were three large

porcelain statues of Fu, Lu and Shou, the Taoist gods for happiness, wealth and longevity. They seemed to be looking at me with a what-a-stupid-boy-you-are expression. I ignored them and shifted my gaze to the high Chinese altar made of blood-red rosewood on which stood a few burning joss sticks emitting a thick scent and lazy fumes that rose up to the ceiling. Behind those joss sticks was a large statue, also porcelain, of Qwan Yin, the goddess of mercy, sitting on a giant lotus and holding a small vase on her lap. On her face was an expression of such equanimity that it disturbed me and prompted me to look away.

Within minutes, another woman who looked like the old hag's elder sister appeared. The woman was fat, ugly as well.

"She, Jane, your masseuse," the reception hag told me brightly, pointing to the fat woman.

I looked at her, wide-eyed, from top to bottom. "I ... ermm ... I ... um ... Can you get me someone younger? If you please?" I asked politely, while—in my mind—I said, "She Jane or maybe Jane's elephant, but I no Tarzan, lor. Gimme someone young and soft for my young and soft muscles, alamak!"

"She vely good! Vely vely experience," the receptionist said.

"I can see she is 'vely experienced.' But please ... No offence ... but, I want someone younger," I said firmly.

The two exchanged something fast in Hokkien. Jane looked at me blankly and disappeared inside. "Hokay," the receptionist said finally, "I give you vely chio ger. Vely young. But cost thirty dollar extra, hokay?"

For a moment, I was shocked and didn't know what to say. But having come this far, I was not going back without the "passion touch" of young, girlie hands. I nodded, halfheartedly, and placed three crisp ten-dollar notes on the desk. She pocketed them and said, "Good. You wait for thirty minutes,

hor. She no here. I telephone,” she picked up the phone.

“You go in. Make comfortable. Sauna, TV all inside. Jane show you. Jane make Chinese tea for you,” she said, covering the mouthpiece.

Jane appeared again and led me through a narrow corridor, which had numbered doors on either side. She opened door Number 8 for me and handed me a large, freshly laundered white towel. “You take shower, change towel and wait. You want moe towel, inside cubberd. I bling Chinese tea. You want sauna, TV, you go end colido, turn light,” she said, motioning with her right hand.

The room was small and dimly lit with a clean single bed in the middle. There was a cupboard placed against one of the walls and another door, which I guessed led to the attached bathroom. Although the air was stale and reeked of dampness, the room was clean. I closed the door, undressed and, after wrapping the towel around me, stepped into the bathroom. I was initially a bit reluctant in touching the towel—you never know what things it may have been used to wipe off. But then, it appeared clean and crisp and felt nice in my hands. Luckily, there was a fresh bar of soap in the bathroom; the tiny type you find in hotels.

I had a leisurely bath; the water was hot and refreshing. By the time I stepped out of the bathroom, there was a cup of hot Chinese tea waiting for me. I hung the wet towel in the bathroom towel rack, took a dry one from the cupboard, and wrapped it around my midriff. The hot tea helped in warming me up since I was finding the air conditioning inside the room too chilly for my skin.

By the time I finished my tea, there was a knock on the door, and before I could say “Come in!”, the door swung open and in came one of the prettiest Chinese things I have seen in Singapore. At that moment, all my feelings of having been fleeced out of my hard-earned money vanished in a trice. She

could have been mistaken for a Shenton Way babe except for her skirt, which showed too much thigh for a bank teller.

She crushed her cigarette butt in the ashtray and gave me a sweet, “Hello-how-are-you-I-am-Linda-oil-or-powder?”

“What?” I gaped at her.

“Oil or powder. For massage, you want oil or powder?” she replied with amused eyes.

“Oil,” I said.

From the cupboard, she took out a bottle of baby oil and gestured for me to lie on the bed. I lay on my stomach and became like a lump of chapathi dough in her hands. She started kneading me, and I started needing her. Ooh so badly! I moaned like I had never moaned before. “Aaaahhh ... that’s it ... yesssss ... ooohh ... a little to the left ... that’s the point ... hmmmm ...”

And she was going like, “Good muscles ... not too much ... not too little ...”

“What’s your name?” she asked casually.

“James Bond,” I replied. She giggled.

She removed my towel with an expert flick and started on my buttocks and thighs.

“You married?”

“James Bond’s not married,” I replied.

She pinched my butt.

“Ow! Hope I don’t have to pay extra for that.”

She giggled again. “You’re a joker ... You’re also a liar.”

“And you speak good English for a Passion Touch girl.”

“Was a remisier once upon a time ... with the Midas touch ... earning big bucks ...” She applied light karate chops on my thighs with both her hands.

“Aaah … that feels good …” I said, letting off a sigh of pleasure.

“Now a masseur … with Passion Touch … earning big fucks,” she said with a chuckle and quickly added, “Have no regrets anyway. Now turn over.”

I turned over and lay on my back. She deftly laid the towel over my middle. I looked at her straight. The dim ceiling light was behind her head and I couldn’t make out the look on her face. She leaned closely to massage my chest after sprinkling oil on it. Her hair fell on my face. I could smell her shampoo mingled with a faint scent of sweat. Garlic sweat.

“So what’ll it be? Hand job, blow, sandwich or the full course?” she asked; her tone was very professional.

“Sandwich,” I said confidently, although I wasn’t quite sure what she meant. I felt like a snack anyway.

“That’ll be forty dollars extra, okay,” she said softly.

“That’s one expensive sandwich!” I thought, and swallowed spit. But I didn’t want to give her the impression I was a cheapskate. So I nodded my head impatiently and asked her to get on with it.

She lifted my towel like a magician lifts the cloth over the caged bird. She took one look at my manhood and said, “Now I know why you called yourself James Bond: that’s a nought-nought-seven-inch — nought-nought much!” she giggled.

“Nought-nought little either,” I said crossly.

“Just kidding. Don’t worry, you’re average,” she said, taking off her clothes. In no time, she was stark naked. She wore absolutely nothing under her natty outfit. She had a slim body with perky tits—very playful, like twin puppies, jiggling at the slightest movement, topped by tiny cherry nipples. Her skin was like milk.

She unscrewed the spout on the bottle of oil, poured a generous amount on my chest and applied it thickly all over. Then she handed me the bottle and

said, “Now it’s your turn.”

I raised myself to a sitting position and poured a handful of oil into my cupped hand. I then applied the oil on her chest and stomach. She gently pushed me back onto the bed, whispering, “Lie, you liar.”

She then lay on me, skin on oily skin, like two slithering snakes. “No sex, okay. Only touch touch. For sex, my rate is a hundred.”

Hundred bucks for a blasted fuck! I knew my wallet had only a fifty-dollar note. Not this time anyway, I thought. “Not that I don’t have the money, but I think I will pass this time,” I said.

She looked at me but said nothing. She hugged me tight and continued rubbing her body on mine. Her breath came hot on my lips. I could catch the whiff of Fisherman’s Friend mints, apple and cinnamon, I guess. Her hair fell around my face like a black curtain. My whole body tingled with sensations never felt before. Primal moans rose in my throat. Down below, I was hard as rock. Feeling my hardness, she asked breathlessly, “Do you want sex?”

“Do you … take Visa?” I asked between gasps.

“Cash … only cash,”

“But …”

“Yeah … many others do, but we don’t … Never mind,” she said, getting up, “There’s always a next time.”

“But where’s my sandwich?” I asked innocently as she was putting her clothes back on.

She looked at me blankly before saying, “Oh! I forgot to tell you—usually a sandwich massage is an oily guy between two girls. But I didn’t think you wanted to lie on top of Jane. After all, you’re only James Bond, not Tarzan,” she chuckled.

“Oh yes—the *sandwich* massage!” I exclaimed. Suddenly things were a lot clearer.

She gave me another blank look and said, “My time is up. Forty dollars please.” A month later, I rang up Passion Touch and asked for Linda.

“She go Australia. Myglate myglate. With *ang moh* boyflend,” the reception hag said.

About the author:

After spending 18 years in Singapore, Hari Kumar, who humbly describes himself as a casual writer, decided to relocate to Canada to watch fat icicles grow from winter-worn roofs. His work has appeared on a number of literary websites and in books such as *Best of Singapore Erotica* (Monsoon Books, Singapore) and *India Smiles* (Penguin Books, India).

Banging Bill's Wife

Stephen Leather, Thailand

This is the truth, the absolute truth, cross my heart and hope to die, as true as I'm sitting here. I can barely believe it myself, but it happened and it happened to me. The name's Adrian, better not tell you my surname because it's a small world. A bloody small world as it happens. I'm a stockbroker; usually I deal in shares, but I dabbled in bonds for a few years. Just on my way to my new job, and the company's paying, which is why I'm up here in Business Class and not in the back of the plane with the plebs.

I've done all right over the last few years, though I have had my share of setbacks, truth be told. I worked for Barings before they went bust, even worked in the same office as Nick Leeson for a while. Nice lad, was Nick, just got a bit out of his depth, that's all.

I worked for Lehman Brothers for two years, not long before they went out of business, and I was with a subsidiary of RBS in Hong Kong when they had to be bailed out by the British taxpayer. That's why my mates they call me Jonah. They reckon I'm cursed. They're joking, because I always make money for my bosses. Lots of money. I'm a rainmaker, that's why. I bring in the business. When I move, most of my clients move with me. That's what's going to happen this time, as sure as night follows day. Most of them, anyway.

I never really liked Singapore, the whole place changed after Barings went under, but I'll work anywhere providing the money's good. I was in Hong Kong, working in the bond department of Standard Chartered Bank, when I got headhunted by the Singapore firm. You always know when it's a headhunter on the phone. 'Can you talk?' they ask. Tossers. Of course I can talk. That what I do. I talk and people buy. It's called selling.

Anyway, I go in to see the headhunter and it turns out the guy doing the hiring used to be my boss at Barings, Chinese high-flyer by the name of Robert Tam. I always got on well with Robert, so I fly over to Singapore and he introduces me to the top guys and, of course, they offer me the job. More money, expat package, they'd even have paid for school fees if I'd had kids. The one problem was that my bosses in Hong Kong knew that I'd try to take my clients with them, so they had me out of the office as soon as I handed in my notice, and insisted that I couldn't start work in Singapore until my notice period was over. Three months.

They'd pay me and my bosses in Singapore said they'd pay me, too, so I was getting double salary but effectively I was on gardening leave. But I've always lived in flats and never had a garden, so I decided to spend three months in Thailand. I've done a few R&R runs to the Land of Smiles over the years, but I'd never spent any real time there, so I figured I'd go and blow off some steam. Singapore pays well, but it's not the most exciting city in the world for a single guy. I think maybe that was why Nick Leeson went off the rails.

Anyway, I booked myself into the Landmark Hotel on Sukhumvit Road, between the red-light areas of Nana Plaza and Soi Cowboy, and started to let rip. Like a bull in a china shop. I did my rounds of the Bangkok bars, night after night in Nana Plaza, Soi Cowboy and Pat Pong. I went through the massage parlours, the short-time hotels, the go-go bars, hung around the

freelance joints like Gullivers, the German Bar in Soi 7, the Bed Club and the nightclubs attached to the five-star hotels. I spent weekends in Pattaya, the sex-tourist's Disneyland-by-the-sea, non-stop sex fuelled by drink and drugs. In the first month alone, I went with more than a hundred girls. At least. To be honest, I lost count. I'd have breakfast, then a soapy massage, then a nap, then pick up a bargirl and take her to a short-time hotel, then have dinner and then go to a nightclub and pick up a freelancer. And that would be a quiet day. Sometimes in Pattaya I'd get laid four or five times, often with several girls at the same time.

I slowed down a little during the second month. I guess I was getting bored. Funny, right? Who would ever imagine that you'd get bored with sex? But that's what happened. There are only so many positions, only so many variations on a theme, and after a while it all became the same, pretty much. Drink, shower, sex, shower, sleep. And money always changed hands. I think that's what started to take the edge off it, the fact that I always paid. The girls smiled and laughed at my jokes and seemed to have a great time, but I was paying them. I began to realize that it was all about the money. No money, no honey.

That's when I discovered Craigslist. It's brilliant, Craigslist. Craigslist.org: none of that dot com nonsense for those guys. It's a website where you can buy or sell stuff, and where you can meet people too. Real people. And if you're looking for free sex, then Craigslist is the place to go. I found it by accident. I think I was googling 'Free Porn' like I often do and it took me to a Craigslist page where a girl called Porn was looking for a date. She was a nurse at a Bangkok hospital and she was looking for a Caucasian guy with a good heart and I figured that two out of three was enough, so I called the mobile number, met her for coffee and an hour later, I was in her bed and between her legs. Sweet girl, and not very experienced despite her name. And

she didn't ask me for money. Not one baht.

It was a one-night stand and the start of many, all courtesy of Craigslist. It was brilliant: hundreds of Thai birds gagging for it and not a penny to be paid. Most of the girls who posted put up their pictures so you could see what you were getting, and a few minutes on the phone was all it took to check that they were genuine. Then I'd go around to their place. I made that a rule. They never came to my hotel, I always went to them. That was one of the things that made it fun—you got to spend time in their world. Mind you, most of them lived in tiny studio flats full of stupid stuffed toys with posters of Korean boy bands on their walls, but that's not the point. I was getting to see real girls in their own homes and I was getting to bang them for free.

I slept with students, teachers, three air hostesses, half a dozen nurses, and even a policewoman; and yes, she wore the uniform and handcuffed me to the bed. I never told any of them my real name and I kept changing SIM cards because I didn't want then phoning me after the event. Besides, there was no need to make any return visits because there was a constant supply of fresh girls coming on line. Word was spreading that the website was a great way for Thai girls to meet Western guys and new girls were logging on every day.

After a few weeks, though, even the thrill of free sex began to pale because there was just so much of it, and I was actually looking forward to starting work. But the week before I was due to leave Thailand, I found myself browsing through the Craigslist website, looking for something, or someone, to do. I checked the Women Seeking Men page but didn't see anything there that I fancied, so I went through the Erotica section, but they were all pay-for-play birds. If I wanted to pay for sex I'd rather pick up a dancer from Soi Cowboy.

Then I went to Casual Encounters and, bingo, there it was: 'Fancy

A Gang Bang In Pattaya?" I wasn't sure whether the offer was giving or receiving, but I clicked on it anyway. The first thing I saw was a picture of a fit Asian bird, probably Thai, with great tits and hair down to her waist and a black strip across her eyes and nose so you couldn't see her face, but the body was out of this world. Fit as a butcher's dog, as my dear old dad used to say. It was hard to judge her age. She wasn't a teenager, but she could have been anywhere between twenty and thirty and didn't look as if she'd had kids.

She was lying on a bed, her back against the headboard and her legs akimbo, her modesty shielded by a small white towel that wasn't much bigger than a flannel. It was her husband that had placed the advert. He said that his wife had a fantasy about being gang-raped and he wanted to film her being shagged by half a dozen or so blokes and that anyone interested in helping to realize his wife's dream should get in touch by email.

Alarm bells were ringing because I couldn't think that any man with a wife like that would want another man going near her, never mind inside her, but I opened up a fake Gmail account and sent him a message saying that I was interested and asking for more information.

He got back to me later that night with another photograph of his wife, fully naked this time, but with another black strip across her face, and a list of questions. Where was I from? What colour was I? How old was I? How much did I weigh? And he wanted a photograph, though I didn't have to show my face. I did, though, have to show my dick, which seemed a fair enough request considering what I was hoping to do with it.

So, I answered the questions fairly truthfully, though I did knock four years off my age and a couple of kilos off my weight. I took a photograph with the webcam of my laptop and made damn sure that I was holding my breath and attached that to the email. An hour later, he emailed me back with a mobile phone number and asked me to call him.

I went out and bought a new AIS SIM card and tapped out his number. He was English, quite well spoken, bit of a Hooray Henry, I thought. He said his name was Bill and I said I was Jonah. My private joke; I said I was hoping to have a whale of a time, but he didn't seem to get my attempt at humour.

He had more questions for me, basically checking that I was who I said I was. I guess he didn't want a big sweaty African turning up to do the dirty with his nearest and dearest, which I guess under the circumstances was only natural. Eventually, it was my turn to ask a question, and to be honest I only had the one. Why?

It turned out that his wife had a bit of a past. She used to be a go-go dancer in one of the racier Nana Plaza bars and had been working for five years or so before he met her. In his mind, he was a white knight, riding to her rescue. I didn't see it that way, of course. Five years working in a go-go bar meant she'd probably been with more than a thousand men. Sloppy seconds didn't even come into it.

Anyway, she'd been the perfect wife for going on ten years apparently, a whore in the bedroom and a three-star chef in the kitchen. (Or maybe it was the other way around.) But recently she'd seemed unhappy, and after he'd got her drunk one night, it all came tumbling out. She missed the life, she missed having sex with strangers, and having just turned thirty-five, she was worried that men no longer wanted her. She didn't look thirty-five in the photographs, I have to say. I mentioned that to the guy and he agreed, saying his wife spent a lot of time in the gym and the beauty parlour.

The news of his wife's unhappiness hit Bill hard, but she explained that it wasn't about him, she loved him and never thought about being unfaithful, but she had this ache, this craving, that just wouldn't go away. He didn't say who first came up with the idea, but between them, they arrived at a solution. One night, with half a dozen guys. All strangers. For that one night,

she could do whatever she wanted, as many times as she wanted, and her husband would video it so that she would always have the pictures to relive the memory.

It was the first time that he had mentioned a video and I said I didn't want to be filmed, but he said all the men would be wearing masks. He explained that his wife didn't want to see the faces of the men that she was having sex with, and also it meant that the men wouldn't be worried about being recognised, which suited me fine. Like I said, it's a small world. I asked him if our dicks would also be wearing masks, and he said that was up to the guys. Condoms would be optional because everyone would have to email him a medical certificate saying that they were free of all sexually transmitted diseases.

He asked me if I was still interested and I said I was, and that's when he gave me the details of where and when. It was that coming Friday, which suited me just fine because on the Sunday I was flying to Singapore to start the new job. The next day, I went and paid a doctor five hundred baht for a medical certificate. The doctor didn't even bother asking for a blood test. I emailed a copy to Bill and he emailed me back to say that he looked forward to meeting me. I couldn't get over how polite he was, considering that I was going to be banging his wife and all.

Bill said that he'd booked a suite at the Sandy Spring Hotel in Pattaya, not far from the beach. On Friday, I paid a taxi driver one and a half thousand baht to drive me from Bangkok and had him drop me on the beach road. I told him that if he waited for me, he could drive me back in a few hours and he agreed to wait. He gave me a card with his mobile phone number, and I walked up Soi 13.

The event was due to kick off at eight o'clock in the evening and would end whenever Bill's wife said that she'd had enough. I was early, so I walked

across Second Road and had a coffee and a sandwich in Starbucks as I watched elderly overweight sex tourists in vests and shorts waddle by with their bargirls. Pattaya is a funny old place, where every man is handsome and every girl is available—at a price. It's also one of the suicide capitals of the world, where membership of the Pattaya Flying Club is achieved by taking a dive off a high-rise balcony, usually the result of a broken heart or an empty bank account and probably both.

At five to eight on the dot, I swallowed a Viagra tablet and wandered back down Soi 13 and into the hotel. I don't normally use chemicals to get an erection, but I was a bit apprehensive about performing in front of an audience. A uniformed busboy smiled and wished me a good evening. The pretty girls at reception nodded and smiled as I headed for the lift.

Riding up to the eighth floor, I took my mask out of my pocket. The first mask I'd bought was a rubber Bin Laden from a stall on Sukhumvit Road, not far from Nana Plaza, but it was bloody uncomfortable and I could hardly see out of it. I ended up buying a cowboy set from the toy department of the Emporium department store that included a small black mask to be worn when robbing stagecoaches. It was small and I had to loosen the elastic, but I figured that so long as it covered my eyes and nose it'd be fine. I slipped on the mask as I walked down the corridor and knocked on the door of Room 807.

The door was opened by a big man wearing a dark blue robe and a stocking over his head. I tried not to laugh as he offered me his hand and introduced himself. It was Bill. I shook his hand and he closed the door behind me. He was holding a clipboard and he ticked off my name. He had a huge beer gut, the pasty white flesh flecked with blue veins like a ripe Stilton, and knobbly knees that wouldn't have looked out of place on an elderly elephant. The fact that the stocking was squashing his features made

it difficult to work out how old he was, but I guess he'd be in his fifties, early sixties maybe.

‘Am I the first?’ I asked, looking around. There was a sofa and a table and a large television but no other guests.

‘You’re the fifth; the others are in the bedroom,’ he said, nodding at a door. ‘This is where I meet and greet, and check that you’re who you say you are. I have to be careful,’ he said, in his plummy voice that made me think of afternoon cream teas and croquet on the lawn. ‘I wouldn’t want the wrong sort of person turning up.’

‘Absolutely,’ I said, though frankly I wasn’t sure who the wrong sort of person would be when one was talking about gang-banging one’s nearest and dearest.

He opened a door and took me through to the bedroom, where four men were standing around a cupboard laden with drinks. There was a short, stocky guy in a fake Lacoste shirt and baggy blue jeans wearing a black ski mask; a tall thin guy in a Chang Beer T-shirt and shorts wearing a rubber wolfman mask; a youngish guy in a tracksuit wearing a cardboard mask with a dog’s face; and a guy in a Spiderman mask who had taken off his shirt to reveal the hairiest chest I’d ever seen. He looked like an ape, and his bow legs and close-cropped hair added to the effect. They all nodded at me.

They moved aside and Wolfman waved at the bottles of booze. ‘Free drinks,’ he said, nodding at Bill. ‘Courtesy of our host.’ I picked up a bottle of Tiger beer. Next to the booze there was a bowl filled with blue Viagra tablets, another filled with small white tablets that I guessed were Ecstasy, and several smaller bowls which could only have been cocaine. By the bed was a large bowl of condoms and two tubes of KY Jelly.

‘We’re waiting for one more, but I think we can get started,’ said Bill, looking at his clipboard. ‘Why don’t you guys get ready.’

The guy in the ski mask took off his shirt and jeans. He wasn't wearing underwear and he already had a huge erection, which I figured was probably chemically-induced. The Hairy Guy took off his trousers to reveal legs that were just as hairy as his chest.

'I don't see your wife,' I said, popping the cap off my bottle of beer.

'She's in the bathroom,' he said.

'She bloody well better be,' said the guy in the ski mask. He had a Scottish accent. Glasgow maybe. As he turned to look at the bathroom door, I saw that he had a blue and white cross of St Andrew tattooed on his arse.

There was a knock on the door and Bill went through to the other room with his clipboard. I took off my shirt and trousers and hung them up in the wardrobe. I was wearing my Union Jack underwear, flying the flag. The Scotsman grinned and raised his beer bottle in salute. 'Nice,' he said. I hoped that he was talking about my boxer shorts and not my growing erection. I sipped my beer and tried to look as if it was the most natural thing in the world to be in a hotel bedroom with four naked men.

Bill returned with a short man in a linen suit and a pink shirt, his face hidden behind a fancy black mask that was studded with fake diamonds. 'Bon soir, so sorry I am late,' he said. He had a French accent and a large square chin with a dimple in the centre.

'Aye, better late than never,' growled the Scotsman, scratching his backside. 'Can we get started? Let the dogs see the rabbit?'

'Absolutely,' said Bill, putting his clipboard onto the cupboard. 'Just to recap the rules, gentlemen. Basically, everything goes unless my wife objects. Her word is final. If she wants to stop, you stop. If she doesn't want to do anything, you don't do it. She has a safe word. Two words, actually. High Heels. If she says "High Heels", then you know she's serious. I hope that's clear. If she says "Stop!" or "No", then you can ignore it, but if she

follows it with “High Heels”, then you have to stop. Are we all clear on that?” He picked up a small video recorder. It was a Sony, an HD version that stored its video on memory cards.

We all nodded. The Frenchman took off his clothes and then helped himself to a glass of wine. He was overweight and his skin was peppered with small brown moles, but he seemed totally at ease. I couldn’t help but compare dicks. I’d have to say that I was about average, and that Dog Mask was the biggest by far. His member would have looked more at home on a medium-sized Shetland pony. The Scotsman’s was the smallest, about the size, shape and colour of a small carrot. Not that size is important, right? I’m joking. Of course, size is important, and any girl who tells you different is lying.

Bill pointed at the bowl of condoms by the bed. ‘I got all your medical certificates and I can assure you that my wife is clean, so it’s up to you whether or not you use condoms.’

‘Hate the things,’ growled the Scotsman.

‘Right,’ said Bill, ‘let’s get the show on the road.’ He went over to the bathroom, knocked on the door and opened it. ‘We’re ready for you now, honey,’ he said.

She walked out of the bathroom. I’d been worried that perhaps the photographs I’d seen had been Photoshopped, but if anything she was even sexier than in the pictures. She was tall for a Thai, but the stiletto heels made her look taller, with very white skin and long black hair that could have been used in a shampoo commercial, made even blacker by the contrast of the white towel robe she was wearing.

She had amazing cheekbones and as she slid off the robe I could see that her skin was totally unblemished, smooth and soft and white with absolutely no stretch marks or tramp stamps. She’d definitely never had kids, but I suspected that she’d had a bit of work on her face because her nose was

bigger than you find on a Thai, even a Thai-Chinese, which she obviously was. She smiled at us and then bowed her head and *waied* us, putting her hands together as if in prayer. God, that was sexy, seeing as how she was totally naked, except for the shoes.

Her breasts were magnificent, large and full and proud and her stomach was as flat as a washboard. Bill hadn't lied about his wife regularly visiting the gym—you didn't get a body like that by accident.

She lay down on the bed, a sly smile on her face. The Scotsman made a whooping noise and jumped onto bed and thrust his groin at her face. She opened her mouth and took him straight away, clawing at his chest with her long nails, her eyes wide open. I swear her eyes were sparkling with pleasure as she worked on him, moaning softly.

The Frenchman growled like a dog and threw himself on the bed and pawed at her breasts. Bill had his video camera on and was filming away. I moved forward but the Hairy Guy stepped forward at the same time and we banged into each other. We both laughed nervously, I guess neither of us were used to touching another naked man.

‘Age before beauty,’ I said, waving for him to go first.

‘Pearls before swine,’ he said, stepping back. He had a Man-chester accent and sounded a bit like Noel Gallagher from Oasis.

I grinned and got onto the bed. Bill’s wife grinned and moved over to suck me, still holding on to the Scotsman’s dick with her right hand. Her nails were long and painted blood red. I gasped as she took me into her mouth. She was good. My God, she was good.

It went on for hours. Hours and hours. Thank God for the Viagra. She was insatiable and so were we. She took us one at a time, two at a time, three at a time, and at one point she was on top of me while the Scotsman was in her arse, she was pleasuring Wolfman with her mouth while she had a hand

on two other guys as if she was using ski poles. I don't know where the sixth guy was, but I know where Bill was, standing on the bed with his video camera, capturing it all for posterity.

There wasn't a single thing that she refused to do. Guys came inside her, over her, in her hair, up her arse, in her mouth. She begged for more, she wanted it harder, faster, longer. She mewed like a cat, yelped like a puppy in pain, and bellowed like an angry bull.

Pretty much every hour, Bill would stop and change the memory card in his camera and by midnight, there were four cards on the cupboard by the door.

We started taking breaks. The Scotsman kept going out on the balcony for a cigarette, the Frenchman kept taking showers, Wolfman did a line of cocaine once every thirty minutes, as regular as clockwork. I took another Viagra and four lines of coke and drank half a dozen beers. One of the guys, the one in the dog mask, gave up before midnight. He was having trouble breathing and said he was having chest pains. He'd taken two Viagra and it was a laugh seeing him trying to pull his trousers on over an erection the size of a policeman's truncheon. I don't remember him leaving because by then, I was doing Bill's wife from behind, pounding into her and grunting like a pig while the Scotsman slapped her backside and called her a whore and the Hairy Guy was thrusting in and out of her soft, wet mouth.

There was a lot of name-calling going on, I remember that. We were bastards, we were shits, we were rapists, we were swine. She was a bitch and a cow, a whore and worse.

She was bathed in sweat like a racehorse that had been ridden too hard, and by midnight her eyes were glazed and her mouth wide open, but she wouldn't stop, she wanted more and more and more and wouldn't let us stop even if we'd wanted to.

At one point, just after midnight, she went out onto the balcony and stood looking out over the sea as we took it in turns to screw her from behind. She wailed like a banshee all the time and I was sure that anyone walking down Beach Road must have been able to hear her. When the last guy had finished, I thought that would be the end of it, but she went back into the room and gave her husband a long, slow, blow job while he filmed her and then she lay on the bed again and started swearing at us, telling us all that we were babies and that if we were real men we'd rape her and make her beg for us to stop. We took her at her word and for the next hour, she was raped in every way that a man can rape a woman.

I left about two o'clock in the morning. I was exhausted, I was drained, and I was sore. By then it was just the Scotsman, the Frenchman and the Hairy Guy still at it, and she was taking everything they could throw at her.

No one said goodbye or God bless; in fact, no one even looked at me, they were too busy banging Bill's wife. On the way out, I helped myself to one of the memory cards. I know it was wrong, I know it was stealing, but I figured what the hell: I was one of the stars, so I deserved a memento. And I figured that Bill had more than enough video to look at over the coming years.

I took the mask off as I went into the lift, dropped it into a garbage bin on the street, and five minutes later, I was back in my taxi heading towards Bangkok, barely able to keep my eyes open.

* * *

The following week, I started my new job in Singapore. I worked long hours and put everything into the job, knowing that it's vital to give a good impression from day one. Other than the occasional visit to Orchard

Towers—known locally as the Four Floors Of Whores—to pick up some paid-for company, I was practically a born-again virgin. After a week, I found myself checking Craigslist to see if Bill would tout his wife again. I used to watch the video, too, and it was almost as exciting as being there. In fact, it became a regular thing—I’d get home at midnight, after the London Stock Exchange had closed, open a bottle of beer, lie on the sofa and watch it on my big screen TV. I have to admit that I tried calling Bill’s mobile number, but it had been disconnected and I sent him an email asking if he’d thought of arranging a rematch, but it went unanswered.

* * *

To be honest, and like I said, everything I’m telling you is God’s own truth, I couldn’t get that night out of my head. It was the best sex I’ve ever had, bar none. I don’t know if it was the masks, the cocaine, the fact that I was there with strangers, or because Bill’s wife was so enthusiastic, but nothing I’d ever done before or after came close. The memory, and the video, began to torment me, reminding me of what I’d never be able to have again. I realized that no matter what I did in the future, nothing would come close to the sexual experience that I’d had with Bill’s wife. And then, two months after I’d started work in Singapore, they came back into my life, Bill and his wife, in a way that I’d never have expected.

The company arranged to fly over its top clients for a two-day presentation in Singapore—putting them up at the five-star Fullerton Hotel by the mouth of the Singapore River and taking them to the city’s best bars and restaurants while promoting what we thought were the best investments in the region. We’d arranged company visits and interviews with government officials and economists and had several presentations and demonstrations.

It's something most brokers do; the clients get an all expenses-paid holiday and we get to pitch sales to them face to face.

The presentation started on Thursday which gave our guests the option of extending their holidays over the weekend if they so wished—at our company's expense, of course. The guests arrived during the day and our first official get-together was in the evening in a suite at the Fullerton. Elegant waiters glided around with trays of canapés and vintage champagne flowed. I was munching on a piece of smoked salmon on a miniature bagel when I saw them.

I didn't recognise Bill at first because the last time I'd met him, he'd been wearing a stocking over his face, but there was no mistaking his drop-dead gorgeous wife. She was wearing a black dress, low cut to show off her amazing breasts and cut several inches above the knees to accentuate her fabulous legs. She had on stiletto heels and was carrying a tiny gold handbag; around her neck was a thin gold chain with a very large diamond and on her wrist was a diamond-studded Rolex. Pretty much every man turned to look at her as she walked into the room on Bill's arm. Bill was wearing a matching Rolex and a black Hugo Boss suit. He was in his late fifties and without the stocking, he was a good-looking guy in an Alec Baldwin sort of way, though with more grey at his temples.

He strode over to one of our company's top executives and shook his hand, then introduced his wife. She shook his hand, too, and smiled with her soft, warm mouth. I felt myself grow hard as the memories flooded back. Her standing on the balcony, moaning into the wind as we pounded into her from behind. I shivered.

‘She's something, isn't she?’

I turned to see Robert Tam smiling at me. ‘Bloody lovely,’ I said. ‘Who's the guy?’

‘Bill Mayweather,’ he said. ‘He’s based in Dubai. Runs an investment fund for one of the sheiks. He’s on a percentage, and he’s worth millions. Do you want an introduction?’

‘You know him?’

‘Known him for years,’ said Robert. He sipped his champagne and smacked his lips. ‘We don’t do much business with him though. He has his favourites and it’s bloody difficult to get into his inner circle.’

‘I might be able to work some magic on him though,’ I said. I could feel my heart pounding. Handled the right way, the memory card that I’d taken from the Sandy Spring Hotel could be just the magic I’d need to persuade good old Bill to let me into his inner circle.

‘He’s immune,’ said Robert. ‘Always cuts a deal in his favour, takes no prisoners, that’s why the Arabs love him.’

I swirled my champagne around as I stared at Bill’s wife’s legs and her cute backside. I wanted to tell Robert what I’d done to her and what she’d done to me, but that was a secret best kept between me, her, and Bill. ‘I think I might have some leverage,’ I said.

‘Leverage?’ Robert chuckled. He gestured with his glass. ‘Bill’s wife, you mean?’

‘What?’ I turned to look at him, my mouth open.

‘Forget about it, everybody knows about her,’ said Robert.

‘They do?’

Robert nodded. ‘Everybody knows, but nobody says anything. It’s up to him, right? You make your own bed and you lie in it.’

I nodded, but my mind was whirling. How the hell did everyone know what had happened at the Sandy Spring Hotel? ‘I guess so,’ I said.

‘Beautiful. Sexy as hell.’

‘Thai,’ I said. ‘Thai-Chinese, probably.’

‘All the best ones are,’ he said, and I frowned, not understanding what he meant. He didn’t notice my confusion and carried on talking as he looked her up and down. ‘She used to work at Casanova’s, the bar in Nana Plaza,’ he said. ‘One of the star turns, apparently.’

I almost choked. I knew the Casanova Bar. Knew of it, but had never been outside. The aggressive ladyboys with too much make-up and enormous silicon breasts meant that I tended to hurry by with my eyes averted. I’d never been a fan of ladyboys.

‘Bill met her about ten years ago, before she’d had anything done. Basically, she was a guy with long hair back then.’ Robert chuckled and looked around to make sure that no one else could hear him. ‘He paid for the lot. Hormones for the skin, new breasts, plastic surgery on the face, collagen in the lips, and then finally ...’ He made a snipping gesture with his right hand. ‘She had the chop. Or he had the chop. Had it done in Switzerland by one of the top surgeons in the world. Apparently it’s as good as the real thing, except for the old-lubrication problem.’

Lubrication? That’s right; that would explain the KY Jelly by the bed.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Robert, gripping my shoulder. ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

I shook my head. ‘I’m fine,’ I said.

‘Anyway, there’s no leverage there. Everybody knows. It’s the secret that everyone knows and no one mentions. You make your own choices in life, don’t you?’

I nodded. Yes, that’s absolutely what we do. We make choices and we live with them.

‘She’s fit though, isn’t she?’ I nodded. Yes, she was fit.

‘I’m not sure I could ever give her one, though,’ said Robert, slapping me on the back. ‘Not knowing that she used to be a guy. What about you?’

Could you give her one?’

‘Nah,’ I said. ‘Never happen.’

‘There are those that say no one screws like a ladyboy,’ said Robert, gripping my shoulder. ‘They say no one knows what a guy wants better than another guy. What do you think? Think that’s true?’

‘Nah, I like girls,’ I said, but I was finding it difficult to speak. My mouth had gone bone dry. I drained my glass, but my throat was still dry.

‘Don’t we all?’ said Robert. ‘Still, each to his own. If Bill’s happy, that’s all that matters. Whatever rocks your boat, right?’

‘Right.’ And with that, Robert slapped me on the back again and went over to talk to Bill and his wife.

So, that was that. Any thoughts of using the memory card as leverage against Bill went straight out of the window. I was confused, though. Damn confused. The only thing that I could think about just then was that the most intense sexual experience of my life had been in a room with eight other men.

And here’s the thing, the thing that worries me most: I didn’t care. I really didn’t care. The fact that Bill’s wife was a transsexual didn’t worry me one little bit. I still watched and rewatched the video. I still visited the Craigslist website hoping that Bill would arrange a rematch. I still relived that night in the Sandy Spring Hotel—every moment, every position, every orgasm.

I spent so much time daydreaming that my work went downhill and Robert had me in for a chat to say that unless things turned around, he’d have to let me go. I didn’t give him the chance. I applied for a job with a broker in Bangkok and got it. It was half the salary and no accommodation allowance, but that didn’t matter. I just wanted to be in Bangkok, just in case Bill’s wife ever wanted to relive the experience.

And that’s why I’m here, sitting in Business Class and drinking this very

reasonable champagne, heading back to the Land Of Smiles. I'm sure that one day, sooner or later, Bill's wife is going to want to do it again, and when she does, I want to be there. And if she doesn't ...well, maybe I'll swing by Casanova's and see what's on offer there.

About the author:

Stephen Leather is the author of more than twenty novels, including *Private Dancer* and *Confessions of a Bangkok Private Eye* published by Monsoon Books in Singapore, and the Dan 'Spider' Shepherd series and the Jack Nightingale series, both published by Hodder and Stoughton in the United Kingdom. You can find more details of his work at www.stephenleather.com.

Expeditions in the Twilight Zone

Emilio, Philippines and Singapore

Years ago, I occasionally made trekking expeditions to Sabah in East Malaysia, a more intriguing state than those on the peninsula itself. These expeditions involved a few days' walk in a wilderness, usually with a mountain to scramble up. At the end of such a trip, I found myself in Kota Kinabalu, staying in a more elaborate hotel than I normally bothered with. Down in the basement, near the car-park area in the nethermost region of this grand establishment, was what was euphemistically termed a "health centre".

I had not patronised such an establishment before and was not quite sure what to expect. The room was poorly lit, the effect intended obviously being a sombre tranquillity or, perhaps, seductive gloom. It contained a mattress and a washbasin and not much else. I undressed, except for my underpants, then lay down, as only seemed sensible. Eventually a smallish woman appeared; because of the dark, I couldn't make out anything about her looks other than her size. In due course, as I grew more accustomed to the dim lighting and as we grew acquainted with each other, I came to discover she was a Filipina, working overseas like so many others.

This masseuse was a woman of around thirty with longish hair. It was difficult to judge her features because of the sombre ambiance, but her manner appeared stern, perhaps the consequence of reserve or shyness. Nonetheless,

she gave my near-naked body a good hard look, especially the middle zone, and indicated that I should remove my underpants, which she presumably found more offensive than my genitalia. She then abruptly offered me coffee or tea. Thereafter, reluctantly emitting a few gruff pleasantries, she began to massage me, working a little indifferently with oil over most of my torso and limbs. Conversation was limited, partly because of mutual miscommunication and partly because the manner of this particular Filipina (her name, she reluctantly conceded, was Concepcion) was initially very serious, as if she were a doctor confronted with a terminal case. She did not seem very sure of either me or herself. Her voice sounded low, almost gravelly. I could hardly see her, even when I looked back over my shoulders, lying as I was in the typical massage position, face down on the mattress.

Concepcion set to work in a perfunctory manner, as if she were none too keen to touch human flesh. She avoided my shoulders, which happened to be sore and blistering from sunburn; not, as she told me afterwards, out of consideration for any pain I might have felt, but because she thought they might be infected. We talked a little about her life and family. She was divorced; divorced, moreover, with two youngish children who required a maid to look after them while she was at work. "Hundreds and hundreds a month," she griped. Twisting my head over my shoulder, I could see her grimace. Concepcion leant forwards to judge my reaction to this disclosure. Now I could see that she bore a slight scar at the corner of her mouth, as if she had been slashed by a knife. Perhaps reflecting on the injustices of the world, she lapsed into silence. Uncertain as to how matters would develop, I myself slipped into a doze.

I woke to feel a finger tracing a circle or two round my anus. A small, oily hand then moved forward a little to brush my testicles. Meeting with no opposition from me, the small hand began to knead them and then,

increasingly emboldened, pushed further still to work on my male member, squeezing it more and more confidently as it responded and I lifted my body a little to accommodate this pleasant procedure. Suddenly it was clear to me that a new chapter was about to open in my sexual life, which had never proceeded in a smooth, unfolding manner but in fits and starts, like events in the quantum world, lurching randomly into sudden life and equally sudden annihilation.

Concepcion now seemed more urgent and interested. She suggested, though still nervously, that I might like something in addition to her half-hearted massaging of my back and shoulders. I turned to face her and asked what she had in mind. She made her offer of an extra, her *special*. This was to mouth my penis which, although it had originally met with her diffidence, was nonetheless erect. “But you must wear a condom,” she said, with the firmness of a primary-school teacher instructing a child. She then disappeared for what seemed a long time. Returning suddenly, she pointed to my trinity. “You washed it just now?” she asked, pausing a moment. I nodded. Kneeling before me, she tried to unroll a condom onto the relevant part of my body, making a hash of the job. “Quick, you do it,” she said, giving me a small push with one hand while offering the rubber with the other.

I obliged and she started to work with her tongue. Abruptly changing her approach, she told me to lie down on my back, straddling me on all fours and swivelling her body around so that I was staring at her rear. She peered at me between her legs. “You do to me.”

“What?” I said.

“You …” She contorted her upside-down face, searching for the right word. We looked at each other for a few seconds, mutually non-plussed. She waggled her bottom and stuck out her tongue, making circular movements with her head. “Ah”, I said and focused on her backside, my nose level with

her entry and exit points. Her anus, a few centimetres away, was pinkish-brown and puckered round the edge. It was neat and charming enough as far as anuses go, and apparently very clean, but I was not greatly attracted to the reciprocal tongue exercises she had proposed. “No,” I said. Peeking through her legs, her face registered an upside-down version of disappointment. Anus-licking or something of that nature was apparently her particular domain, being relatively safe and uncomplicated.

I renegotiated for a more conventional mode of sexual expression, in which I could be more vigorously engaged.

The lady illustrated an extreme nervousness over actual intercourse: not repulsion or inhibition at the deed itself, but fear that someone would walk into the room which, following the perverse rule in these places, could not be locked. She was equally anxious that the business arrangement be carried out. “I haven’t done this before,” she announced breathlessly, meaning that she had never participated in full commercial sex. This surprised and slightly disconcerted me, as neither had I.

We embraced awkwardly in a standing position, but not without my somehow standing on one of her small feet. “Ouch,” said my partner, recoiling and then re-embracing. Almost immediately, she had a hasty afterthought and disappeared. She scurried across the room and put the cubicle’s pouffe against the door, first stuffing a towel underneath the door so that it would jam if anyone attempted to open it from the outside. This was a cautionary practice which I subsequently found to be near universal. She had obviously consulted her peers on this, even if she were feeling her way in a new field.

All this stumbling and bumbling did nothing to help me sustain my erection ... My partner obliged by poking and pulling at my trinity until vigour was restored. She lay down on the mattress. “Quick,” she said again, hastily raising her short skirt and removing her knickers. We clumsily

engaged after some more fumbling with limbs, clothes and organs. “Wait a minute,” she said suddenly, expelling me in a peremptory manner before wriggling away, “the sheet will be stained.” And indeed, the sheet was rucked up between us, part of our coital tangle.

She repositioned herself on the edge of the mattress so that the crucial zone was off the sheet and my lower limbs on the carpet. We started again. Meanwhile, somebody was clunking something down the passageway and talking in a low voice; probably the cleaning lady dragging a vacuum cleaner. “Oh,” she said, over my shoulder, “they’re coming in!” and ejected me once more. “No, its alright,” she said as the noise passed. “Quick, come back,” and she reinserted me.

We resumed our love-making which, despite her injunctions, was relatively prolonged. I had caught some of her nervousness and could not concentrate on the act. Also, my knees were getting sore from the friction from the carpet. “Can’t we use the mattress?” I asked. “Yes, but I am so worried,” said my partner. She pushed me away yet again and spread a towel, turning over to do so, and we re-engaged in that position. More indeterminate noises could be heard from outside the cubicle. Immediately, she squirmed and tried to say something about the door, but I held her tight despite her wriggling and, after some more confused communication, at long last consummation—at any rate, my consummation—was achieved.

“Phew,” Concepcion said, getting up immediately and looking relieved, as if she had delivered a speech at some important occasion, like a wedding or college speech day. She seemed quite glad that it was all over. She scuttled about, straightening the sheet and restoring her underwear and so forth. I laughed at her amateurishness. “If you find it all so terrifying, don’t do it.”

She smiled at me happily. She was obviously relieved that I was not cross, considering the inelegance of our congress. “You should give me more

because it was the first time”, she said, taking advantage of the good humour. “You should be my boyfriend”, she went on, persisting gently and repeating herself, “I have two children. I have to employ a maid to look after them while I am working here”.

Concepcion then sat down next to me and began an unflattering examination of my body. “What’s that?” she said suspiciously, pointing to some blemish in my groin area. “And that,” she continued, looking critically at the sore patches on the inside of my knees, still stinging from the carpet. “I didn’t want to touch your back,” she said candidly, “It doesn’t look nice.” Then, worried that she had offended me, she said, “Sorry, don’t mean that. You’re not cross?” She peered at me intently, her face pushed close to mine to judge my expression in the gloom of the cubicle, like a cat hoping to wake its owner and be fed.

“Be my boyfriend.” She leant forward enticingly. “Be my boyfriend,” she wheedled again, pressing her body against mine. I leant back, but Concepcion moved further forward until she lay on top of me, her face still close to mine. She came off as much more confident with her clothes on. I found her urging appealing and instinctively wanted to protect her from her past mistakes and present predicament, but afterwards, my natural impulse to incorporate her into my life wore off. Her insistence might have indicated some stronger need for money for drugs than for her children. This thought made me wary of entering into a relationship because I was new to the guild of massage women like her and could not easily judge how stable or controlled they were. In any event, she lived in Sabah and I in Singapore, and my romantic urge to be involved with her soon faded in the pragmatic light of day outside the centre.

And so I entered into the world of the massage women—a twilight, windowless world, not of the extremes of eroticism but of the fumbling

accommodation of desire with commerce ... and sometime intimacy, however awkward and confused.

This world was not, of course, the centre of my existence, as I had loves, work and interests outside the twilight. But it was much of their world. My experience in it was maybe five, at most ten per-cent of my life, if such things may be quantified. But it was significantly more emotionally, for I liked the massage women very much and saw in them as pleasant a division of my fellow human beings as any. Since I inevitably preferred some of the massage women much more over others and spent my time mostly with this preferred subset, my overall impression of them is no doubt a little slanted and rose-tinted, just as their experience of men was skewed towards the sensual and the strayer ... with not a few of the inadequate. Still, I felt soft towards them all and forgiving of their frailties, more forgiving than I would have been of people in other occupations.

On my return to Singapore after my encounter with Concepcion, I set about visiting the local 'health centres' and massage parlours, the first time I had ever set out on a campaign of exploratory promiscuity. Initially, I was a little wary of these twilight women, expecting drug-dependency, perhaps a parasitic or clinging tendency, or—worse—hell-cat behaviour and thievery. However, the first local centre that I visited was very reassuring. Situated in the middle of a big hotel, it was much better appointed than the car-park den in Kota Kinabalu (as behoved this clean and clinical Republic). It had its own shower with an expensively tiled floor and was pleasantly decorated, looking organized and neat with stacked towels, a high massage bed and almost no cigarette holes in the carpet. All this bespoke an almost domestic respectability, an efficient, business-like atmosphere with a faintly medical flavour because of the stacked towels and the general emphasis on hygiene.

While I was in the shower, a female entered the room and offered me

a drink. I could not see her because of the frosting on the shower-cubicle door. She disappeared again while I lay down on the massage mattress. My masseuse appeared and started talking at once, firing off questions and setting to work on my back. She announced herself as Honey or Pussy or some such absurd professional name, but eventually, after a little pressing, admitted to being Caroline.

She was, as far as I could tell peering back over my shoulder, an ethnic Chinese woman in her thirties. I did not want to swivel round to stare at her rudely, as if assessing the quality of the goods I might consume. Caroline herself was quite formal in her interrogation, asking me at the beginning how she should address me and taking it on from there. Thus, we were both careful to preserve the ordinary decencies of social intercourse.

In time, I got to know Caroline a little, although my acquaintance with her was not as deep as with subsequent lovers in this particular twilight zone. She possessed a nondescript face but a pleasing figure and radiated sexual energy.

Caroline, as loquacious as Concepcion had been reserved and as experienced as the latter had been relatively innocent, gave me a rapid, light massage over my back and legs, accompanied by a lot of slapping as well as continuous chatter of interrogation. After less than ten minutes of this process, she ran her fingers and thumbs like a pair of five-legged spiders over my rear and inner thighs, circling my anus and tickling my testicles before kneading them slightly while groping for my penis.

“Do you want to turn over?” said the spider-lady. “That’s a very quick massage,” I said, though I was not complaining at the way proceedings were developing, just commenting on her directness. “Oh no,” said Caroline, “there’s more to come.”

“Your approach is different,” I noted.

“Oh no,” she persisted, “I do not have an approach, I just do whatever is necessary. What do you want me to do?” Since she already had a proprietary grasp on my erect member, this was a polite but rhetorical question. So I asked her for full sex without a condom. She looked at me surprised. This was a test that I applied to the twilight women in my early days to see how sensible they were. Later, I dropped this insult to their intelligence and sense of responsibility.

“Oh no,” said Caroline, not haggling and thus passing the test with flying colours, “you must wear a condom.” She withdrew her hand. I explained my purpose. She congratulated me on my intelligence and responsibility. We praised each other for being so sensible. In the course of this mutual admiration session, Caroline reinstated her right hand on my penis and added the other, as one might when wishing to convey strong fellow-feeling on comforting the bereaved.

After a short pause, she produced a condom from somewhere about her person. “Come,” said Caroline. She applied the condom, stripped off a garment or two and we engaged immediately. “Slowly,” she cautioned, although she herself was hurrying the process, “I am small.” She eased me in, making slight gasping noises—whether genuine or for effect, I could not tell. Whatever the case, she came rapidly to a climax, her legs and arms clasped tightly over my back. “Wait,” she said, and slowed my movements, bringing down her legs and closing them under me. “Come on then,” she commanded, and appeared to have another orgasm. “Do what you like now,” she then conceded and so, having pleasured her, I took my own pleasure and concluded our commercial “act of love”.

Caroline rinsed and dressed, then recommenced massaging me; much more vigorously this second time round, as if stimulated by the intercourse. “How good is business?” I asked. “Alright,” she replied, and rattled away

cheerfully about customers and tips. “The desk takes most of my fee as protection money,” she said, “so I depend on tips.” I assumed that she meant the woman at the reception desk would not allocate her clients unless she got a cut in advance.

“Most men are generous,” she carried on, “even if I do not give them a special, they give me a tip.” She named a sum about the equivalent of twenty American dollars. “For specials, of course, the usual.” Caroline’s ‘specials’ were not very special at all—almost the rule, it seemed. Most massage women were coy about how much full sex they had, but Caroline more or less admitted to a norm of at least a couple a day, assuming that she was getting her fair share of customers in good times.

Caroline was frank about earning most of her money through her amiable and often enthusiastic prostitution. She commented just as explicitly on the range of masculine virility and the size and consistency of organs. Fat men tended to have small penises, while those smaller or comparatively athletic were more generously endowed. A long penis when flaccid might promise much (including alarm to its intended recipient), but often the owner failed to erect it beyond a certain soft engorgement. Small penises, on the other hand, could expand disproportionately into relatively large, hard organs, she noted.

Caroline’s centre was located deep inside what she termed a family hotel, which gave the massage women some security both against the anti-vice authorities and the rougher or more drunken element among their potential clientele. Despite the domestic atmosphere there, she was occasionally called to a hotel room where proceedings were totally safe from outsiders or time limits and could be quite prolonged.

She recounted one such experience with an old New Zealander of eighty-nine. Concerned that she might break his ancient bones, she treated him lightly until he scolded her for her half-heartedness. “Let me massage

you,” he said and so she submitted to his attentions, which proved very robust. It seemed he had been a chiropractor or an osteopath. “You’re a nice girl,” he said and gave her an enormous tip: two hundred American dollars. “He was a nice old man,” she echoed, casually adding that he was incapable of an erection.

At the other end of the age scale, Caroline recalled having serviced spoilt-brat teenagers, children of rich men who were inclined to let their male offspring do as they pleased in the purchase of sex. The youngest in this category was seventeen, an Indian national who claimed he had his first sex at eleven. Caroline was not greatly enamoured of intercourse with young men as they tended to be hasty and force themselves into her before she was properly aroused, despite the lady’s own rapid approach. Once or twice, a father-and-son team had visited the centre, though they did not patronise the same woman. Sometimes, a man whose wife and family were staying in the hotel would pop in for a quick one: appointment, intercourse, clean-up and tip all over within ten minutes.

I asked Caroline for examples of violence or criminality that she had experienced in her profession. She replied that she had had an unpleasant encounter with a Japanese who insisted on having sex without a condom. “Oh no,” Caroline said, whereupon the Japanese threatened to violate her willy-nilly, claiming that he was a gangster in order to make her more inclined to submit. Caroline exited the cubicle fast and sought the help of the receptionist. The Japanese followed her and banged his fist on the reception desk, which the two women were soon cowering behind. Eventually, they called hotel security and the man was escorted out, still threatening all and sundry with the wrath of the mafia.

Another Japanese subsequently informed Caroline that no respectable Japanese gangster would ever admit to being a gangster—at least not in such

a vulgar manner. He knew this because, he modestly conceded, he was a bona fide gangster himself. His penis contained three or four hard little lumps of jade, or some such semi-precious material, inserted to give greater pleasure to the fortunate women that he deigned to copulate with. Apparently, they were also an indication of *rank*, so a super-gangster would be permitted up to ten. I expressed some incredulity at all this, but Caroline said that she could feel the little lumps both with her fingers and her vagina.

Caroline herself had a medium-sized tattoo, a butterfly, her trade-mark, strategically located around the upper area of her protuberant little rump. The butterfly's abdomen thus fused with her rear cleavage and its wings spread a good six centimetres on either side. This decoration was presented as an aesthetic bonus to her customer's gaze if he were approaching its owner from behind. I found this feature engaging; as, indeed, I found much of Caroline.

The greatest reward that Caroline had ever enjoyed came not from a member of the mafia, but from a young, indecently rich pawn-shop owner. I thought at first she was referring to a pornographer and wondered where in Singapore such an enterprise could make its owner a fortune. But this client obtained his money more ruthlessly than by peddling pictures—extracting money from the impoverished or the desperate or the improvidential by charging usurious interest, illustrating that greed is more harmful than lust.

Certainly, he had money to throw around as he gave Caroline thirteen hundred American dollars for one session. I asked Caroline if this was generosity or a form of sexual exhibitionism. She did not understand my question, but described her reaction—which was mostly alarm. She feared she might be accused of theft if such a large sum were found on her. To allay her panic or conscience, she treated all the women in the centre to a meal and gave them a share of what was left—including even the rapacious lady at the reception desk.

I myself considered the pawn-shop owner's generosity a form of sexual showing-off. I liked to reward the massage women with tips over and above their usual fees for their specials, however. I warmed to them and their vulnerability and, if they were not greedy or pushy, which was only rarely the case, showed my appreciation of their moderation and pleasantness with some generosity.

Of course, the purchase of sex carries an inherent stimulus in itself, an addition to the idea of possession. The pawn-shop owner was doubtless indulging himself in an expression of power. He could take what he wanted and give what he wanted and enslave Caroline to his will—or so he thought. For he subsequently offered her ten thousand American dollars to find him a virgin for his personal use. He told her how he had once purchased a maiden by putting up her entire family, mother and father included, in an expensive hotel, paying for the finest meals they could eat. The virgin was duly bedded, deflowered and returned to her family. The parents received their thousands of dollars for the single night.

Even pragmatic Caroline was shocked at this heartlessness. But wealth is power and money can make much acceptable. Doubtless, it was quite rational of the family, if poverty-stricken, to gain at least some security for the future in this time-honoured style of pandering to the sexual whims of the stinking rich. Caroline did not report this individual as cruel or repulsive, just ruthlessly opportunistic—and generous with it. Still, she made no attempt to oblige him with a second treat.

Fairly soon after I met her, Caroline moved to Malacca, initially to a centre, though she intended to leave this form of her trade and earn her living by acquiring and keeping a circle of a few favoured clients. She planned to set herself up as a small independent business, offering massage and sex in small hotels or on holiday weekends elsewhere.

I soon lost touch with Caroline as I had not visited her that often and, although warm and generous by nature, she was not sentimental about her commercial arrangements. Experience had taught her that kindness and consideration were productive and helped her in her profession, as in many services, but that feelings other than friendship were best avoided in the twilight world.

About the author:

Emilio Malvar is a native of Cebu in the Philippines who has also lived in America, Singapore, Venezuela, Singapore, Indonesia and back in the Philippines (in that order).

He writes poetry and plays in addition to his short fiction, with a raft of published poems and two produced plays to his credit. (Or to his notoriety, as the case may be.) He is currently writing his first novel, an epic piece on the colonization of the Philippines.

Two Men and a Plan

O Thiam Chin, Singapore

We are not the products of our circumstances, but we are surely the sum of all the stupid choices that our parents have inflicted on us.” Shun told me this when he took me to my first client.

“And there is nothing we can do to undo this damage—not you, not me,” he added emphatically.

Shun liked to spout pop-psychology babble like this, off the top of his head, given any opportunity. He spoke freely, without any fear of consequences, and he was not afraid of offending anyone. Least of all me.

How he derived all these sage-sounding maxims that he liked to toss around so much was well beyond me. But he did tell me once that he enjoyed reading the works of writers like Douglas Coupland and Chuck Palahniuk because, according to him, they tell truths—“dark sickening truths of our depraved times”—that other writers are incapable or unwilling to write about. How true that was, I did not know. I hated to read. Beyond the textbooks and all the assigned reading materials given out by my lecturers and tutors each week, I barely had time for other forms of reading, nor did I read for leisure. I considered it a waste of time. I had better things to do.

“And treat this client well, you hear? Big fish like him are hard to find, especially since he’s paying top dollar for a virgin like you,” Shun said in

jest, throwing a snickering look in my direction.

“Fuck you,” I replied caustically.

“I don’t think so tonight, my dear. He—” Shun emphasised the word, while pointing to the hotel door in front of us, “will be fucking you tonight. And do everything he says. He says fuck, you fuck. He says suck, you suck. He wants to rim you, by all means, spread your legs wider and let him rim. Don’t say no, don’t ever, or we’ll lose him. Remember, it’s easier to retain an existing client than scout for ten new ones.” Shun grinned at me and gestured for me to knock on the door.

I hated him when he spun out this kind of tough talk, like I was the novice and he was the professional. As if this was my first time fucking or sucking or rimming. Fucker. But on a deeper level, I knew that I did not want to disappoint him nor be angry with him for long. I hated this mixed feeling, this anger combined with an eagerness to please him and do what he said. I hated to admit it because I knew exactly why I reacted in this way. Because I knew that I had grown to like Shun a lot. Damn it, damn me.

“I’ll pick you up when you’re done, or when he’s done with you. Give me a call later,” Shun said, flashing me his killer smile and nudging me again to knock on the door.

Before I could say anything more to him, he had turned and begun to walk away, down the quiet corridor towards the lift. I stood and watched him saunter away from me. He turned the corner and disappeared from my sight.

I stared at the room door—235—and gathered my random thoughts. This was not my first time fucking another guy, so why was I feeling this way? This dreaded sense of inevitability? Had I made a wrong choice here? And if so, why did I agree to Shun’s idea in the first place?

I took in a breath, and felt the sharp intake of air lifting away some of my anxieties. I knocked on the door. It opened almost immediately and I

entered the hotel room.

* * *

I was cruising in one of the toilets in the university hostel where I was staying when Shun first saw me. Right away, my sight was on him, this handsome and darkly tanned man, muscular in an athletic way. My lust went into high alert instantly, mounting all my senses into full force. Of course, I had seen him around on campus; it was hard not to notice him, with his clean-cut good looks, which no doubt attracted attention from women and men alike. Well, gay men, in any case.

Being in such close proximity with him, in the toilet, I grabbed my chance. I tried to arouse his attention with an obvious look of lust and longing. He was washing his hands, but I could tell he was aware that I was looking hard at him, getting his attention. He glanced in my direction and caught my lingering stare, my intentional body signals. He did not look surprised or puzzled by my actions, nor did he walk away with an unhidden disgust, as some would when faced with people like me in the public toilets or changing rooms. Instead, he walked over to me in a fume.

“What are you looking at?” he asked angrily. He stood inches away from my heated face, his words coming at me with unbridled force. I looked away guiltily, cursing inwardly for trying to hook the wrong guy. But Shun pressed on, his angry words building up to a crescendo.

“You make me sick! All day long, hanging around in public toilets, in school, at the pools, anywhere, waiting with that cock-hungry look, eager to suck on any cock that comes along the way. You pathetic fuckers—get a life!”

His words came out in a torrent while his intense gaze continued to remain on me. My body began to tremble visibly, as my own words choked

in my throat. I wanted to say something, anything, in return, but I did not. I was scared somehow. I did not want to be caught like this and the shame of being trapped in this awkward situation only ate at me relentlessly, building up to an unbearable degree.

I quickly gathered up the courage to walk briskly away and head for the exit. But Shun stopped me abruptly on my way out and demanded to have my details. “Give me your hostel room number; if not, I’ll report you to the dean,” he threatened. In the heat of being caught, exposed and threatened, I did as he told me. I gave him my hostel room number without a second thought and left the toilet hurriedly.

That night, Shun knocked on door and I let him in. He fucked me without saying a word and I became his secret friend.

Naturally, I wanted to ask him about his outburst during our first meeting in the toilet. But I kept quiet as I was afraid of upsetting him and did not want to appear too forward, lest he drop me after a few fucks. Basically, I had to acknowledge he was a great fuck and there were not many like him around, at least not in the university. The weekend sex in town always seemed so far away, especially with my schoolwork and projects with looming deadlines; to have Shun nearby for a quick fuck was more than I could ask for.

So after that first night he fucked me, and the night that followed, I let him have his way with me, whichever way he wanted me. And he came every night for the whole week, always around eight, when my roommate was in the library poring through his school texts or assignments till late at night. Shun kept absolutely quiet throughout the fucking. And I followed his lead and kept quiet. I did not want to spoil anything between us at this stage.

* * *

“Sometimes you really make me sick. Always hanging around some pathetic toilet, waiting for some cock to appear.”

We had agreed to meet for lunch at the canteen after our lectures. Shun majored in Mechanical Engineering in National Technological University, where he was in his final year, while I was in my second year in the same engineering faculty, taking Computer Sciences.

Shun was in a good mood that day, going through his litany of complaints about me. This was four months after we first met in my hostel toilet.

“You can never stop, can you?” Shun asked in a tone that preempted any reply from me. Not that I had anything to say in return. All that he had said was true, in some sense. I cruised for sex and I sucked cocks. It was simple as that, and Shun knew and was able to exploit it. It was hard to change one’s nature, and Shun knew this well.

And he knew where he stood in the gay food chain and wanted to remain there, among those in the upper echelon, feasting and preying on those below him. A vicious cycle of man-eating-man within the gay world. And he knew how to make the most of his looks to give him what he wanted, in any circumstance. He refused to be the product of his circumstances, a fate and state that he abhorred, because, to him, “... it rules out the possibility—or certainty—of free will and the stupid choices that made us who we are.” And so he stuck to his self-made logic and beliefs.

“Since you are always so cock-hungry, then learn to make use of this desire for your own advantage, to gain something for yourself, not just swallow what comes along the way.”

I gave him a blank look and a disgusted cluck of the tongue. Shun saw my look of contempt but ignored it completely and continued, “What I’m saying is this: since you are still young, only twenty-three and not bad-looking, you can use these god-given attributes and your superb cock-sucking skill for

some gains, to reap the benefits of your youth, so to speak. To keep it simple: Let sex and money go hand in hand, that's what I'm saying."

I was not surprised by his suggestion since I had known for some time that Shun had been a rent boy for a while—since his junior college days, in fact. While Shun did not spell out exactly what he was doing, he had dropped strong hints about this “freelance job” he had which allowed him to pay for his school fees and some “small luxuries.” From what I could gather from our conversations and see with my own eyes, he was being way too humble about how lucrative this job could be. He was earning tons from his so-called freelance work, as far as I could tell. Shun did not hesitate to pay for the meals we had, the movies, the clothes and bags that I wanted, my school fees, my allowance. He relished being “the provider,” he told me once after we had sex, “unlike my father, who ran away with his mistress, leaving nothing for me and my mother.” When I tried to inquire more about his family background, he grew very still and quiet, lying like a stranger beside me in the dark. And that was when I knew never to ask him again about his family. I would let him tell me what he wanted to reveal, if he chose to, but I could never ask him for details or any questions of that sort.

“So you want me to be like you?” I said mockingly, enunciating each word slowly.

“Yes, and I’ll be your mentor or something. Your daddy pimp, so to speak.”

“You? So what’s in it for you? What will you gain?”

“Fifty-fifty for the first few times. After that, seventy-thirty, you seventy, me thirty. How’s that?”

“Sounds fair. But how are you going to find the clients?”

“That’s for me to worry about.” Shun smiled at me disarmingly, as if hoarding a common secret of which I had no knowledge, and I was briefly

agitated by his cocksure attitude.

“In case you are so blind and haven’t noticed, living in that little world of yours,” he pointed to my head with wry off-handedness, “there are plenty of rich old faggots around who’re dying for some companionship and a quick fuck now and then. And we’ll give them just that, a good fuck. Their money for the sex we give. A fair transaction.”

While I disagreed with Shun on many occasions, what he had just said made plenty of good sense. In a way, he dared to put into words what went on in his head and was able to justify his actions with his own concocted motives and convictions. I would have failed to see—or maybe refused to acknowledge—these basic human needs of love and sex. Clear knowledge was not something I wanted to hold onto, I found it too cumbersome, a burden. But the fact that we are all lonely and always craving for some form of companionship, to the extent of being willing to pay anything for someone to love, to hold even for a short while, all these rang true to me.

I did not answer him; what could I say to what he had just told me? How much of it was true, how much of it was fabricated by him? I did not know. I had never paid for sex nor had I been paid for sex. Most of the sex I ever had up to then had been the anonymous, cruising-in-the-toilet kind. Of course, I was vaguely aware that there was a dark, seedy side to the sex trade, but I was never that curious to find out more. But Shun knew that world well and was willing to share his knowledge with me. He wanted to be my friend and pimp. So I listened to him like a young protégé learning the ways of the world.

* * *

Shun kept his word and let me keep the money I earned, after the fifth time he introduced me to a new client. Though at that point, I was not hard up for

money, as I had developed a steady flow of regular clients that patronised me. After the initial meeting, they would come back to me for more and I would always agree to every request. Why say no to good money? I reminded myself constantly, and slowly I was convinced of the validity of what I had said.

“Keep the rates fixed,” Shun reminded me for the first few times. “And don’t change them at all. It’s in the best interest of both you and your clients.”

Within a few months, I was already getting the hang of the trade, of what needed to be done or was expected from Shun and the clients that he introduced me to. Shun would scout out prospective clients: some were his old clients, some he found through his ingenious means of contact, which he kept hidden from me. Given the secrecy that governed this kind of sex, still banned in Singapore and subject to criminal prosecution, I was genuinely surprised and mildly curious how Shun managed to find these contacts.

He once told me, when we were having dinner in a shopping centre food court in Jurong after our economics classes, that guys would often approach him in gay clubs on the weekends and chat him up. Slowly they would express their interest in knowing him more, some blatant or bold enough might even suggest some action for later. Of course, Shun would assess each person according to his own criteria, which were quite simple actually: he must be rich; he must own at least a Lexus, Mercedes or Porsche; he must live by himself in some District 9 or 10 apartment; and he must hold a high senior-management position in some big-shot company. These criteria were non-negotiable, he said, otherwise one might compromise and lose out in the end. Shun reminded me countless times that I was in it for their money, not for some fucking relationship or friendship.

“They do not care about you—that is why they’d rather pay for sex than invest their time and effort in finding somebody to build a reasonable

relationship with. These people do not have the time for such things and that is the reason why we exist. We provide them with the one-stop centre where they can purchase companionship, sex and cheap feelings for a premium price. It is a fair deal.”

As he said these things, Shun’s eyes would often glint with a self-satisfied concentration, as if he had set everything in place and nothing would go wrong. To him, our freelance work was based on a supply-and-demand fulfillment of human needs. The nature and practicality of what we were doing could be set down in simple workable rules and a positive mindset. The ABCs of the gay sex trade, so to speak.

Shun was amoral, and he lived by what he believed in. “Nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it,” he would say, spouting a dead wise man’s often-repeated, dead-of-meaning axiom. But he also had his own salubrious blend of half-fucked ideas and self-thought-out rules of gay life.

I told him once, “Maybe you should write a book, be the voice of our generation, start a new sexual revolution here in Singapore, break new fucking frontiers for us disenfranchised and delusional faggots. Perhaps people would take note of us. We would be the mainstream and they, these normal heterosexual fucks, would finally be sidelined and marginalised, a sideshow of freaks preserving their straight traditions and way of life.” But Shun just shot me a what-the-hell-are-you-talking-about look, as if I was the biggest idiot in this world and my words were all one-cent coins—useless, worth nothing.

“And why the hell would I do this? To tell the big fucking world about what we are doing? The bloody reason why we are able to do well, to get the clients we are getting now, be paid obscenely for our sex, is because we—our deeds, are kept hidden, away from the public eye and this secrecy grants us greater value. Because we are scarce, ‘at a premium,’ we are always in

demand.”

* * *

“Don’t think too much about what you’re doing. And cut the Pretty Woman crap about not kissing on the lips, okay? It was embarrassing when I called Gabriel to check with him and he told me about this. When did you devise this romantic-crap stuff? Too much movies in your head.”

Shun and I were heading for our morning lectures at the university and he was admonishing me on what I had done wrong during the latest weekend assignment. Walking up the stairs towards the lecture theatre at eight forty-five on a cloudy, lazy Monday after a tiring three-tryst weekend, I was far from being awake or alert. But I listened anyway, nodding my head to what Shun had to say, paying what little attention I could muster.

As I listened to him, I looked around at the other students walking alongside us, heading for their respective classes, carrying their haversacks and files of notes, looking fresh and bright eyed. Some were munching on their breakfasts of buttered toast or freshly cut-up fruit, fiddling with packets of coffee or iced Milo; others were talking animatedly on their mobiles, checking on after-class gatherings with their classmates, making lunch appointments with their friends. I wondered what kind of lives they had, what after-school activities they might pursue. Did they, too, have secret lives they kept from their close friends? Did they have sex three times last weekend and earn almost three thousand dollars from it? Would they share this secret with anyone, if they had the chance to do so? Would they be ashamed?

As I stole quick glances at their faces, I realised how far I was from their way of life, their seemingly normal lifestyle of blind dates, late-night movies, furtive kisses, crushes or cramming for tests. I would never be like them, and

I was half relieved and half scared by this fact. Half relieved because I did not want to be hiding from what I was, from my sexuality and my needs. Half scared because I was heading nowhere and was fearful of being ostracised by my peers, my family and the whole damn society.

Like any pimp worth his salt, Shun wanted to make sure I got the machinations of this trade into my head, and so he kept drilling these words into me, until I could repeat them word for word. By then, I was already onto my eleventh rich client.

“Just be careful in what you do or what the client wants. Always wear a condom and insist on one if he wants to fuck. Be persistent and show that you are in control over this matter. And never give in to bareback sex. Trust me, you don’t want to die from AIDS at your age. It won’t be the best experience of your life.”

I nodded like a puppet and agreed with what he said. “How long?” I had wanted to ask him several times before, but could not drum up any courage to do so. “Why did you go into this line? Was there no other way?” But I knew he would not entertain my questions.

His secret life as a rent boy was known only to me. “Why me?” I wanted to ask. Did his friends know anything about this life at all? Each time I saw him with his classmates or close friends, in the canteen or library or at the swimming pool, he would look away, ignoring me completely. He would feign that nothing was out of sorts and carry on the conversations with his friends, joking and laughing with them. And every time I would be hurt by his careless actions, no matter how hard I tried not to think about it.

But when he was with me, away from his friends, he displayed a completely different side of himself: a serious no-nonsense Shun, in control of himself and me as well. How could I ever confront him with this disparity? His eccentric behaviour? He had every reason to back away from me, to head

back to his normal life, to have anything and everything he wanted—great looks, peer admiration, good grades, and an attractive personality. What did I have that I could give him? My mouth and my ass? He could have that from anyone, anytime, so why me?

Slowly, Shun began to share other aspects of his secret life with me. About the middle-aged banker who wanted to keep him as a toy-boy and almost bought him a condominium and a car. But Shun turned him down flatly “because he has a wife and two kids, and there are too many fucking complications.”

And about the creative director of a US-based international advertising agency, who wanted more than just normal sex: “He’s such a pervert and jerk, always asking me to do this and that to him, pull off the S&M acts on him. But it’s hilarious, some of the things he’s asked me to do.” Or about a rich Indonesian-Chinese guy, who claimed to love him and wanted Shun to be his boyfriend: “You should be there, to hear him say the things he says. Taken straight from some trashy magazines or C-grade romance novels. Lovable, but too clingy.”

Where Shun got some of this clientele, I did not know and really did not care to know. But it bothered me to no end, to know that he was with these strange men, let alone having sex with them. And so I didn’t ask him anything about them.

* * *

I should have seen it coming sooner or later. Shun was planning to leave me on my own. We had been good friends, but our friendship was not something that could be carried along in our own separate lives. It would be incongruous, even absurd. Of course, by then, I already had a small but growing pool of

clients generating a steady flow of comfortable income.

“Do you know what I’ve been doing? Teaching you everything that I have learnt through my mistakes, bad experiences and weird encounters? It’s not about the money. It’s about strengthening your guts and mind.” Shun looked straight into my face, saying these words with a controlled demeanour, his eyes intensely lucid. “When I first saw you in the toilet, all I saw was a pitiable creature, crawling around on his fours, looking so helpless and lost, and I was so angry. ‘Why are you doing this to yourself?’ I wanted to ask, ‘Being at the mercy of the next person who comes into the toilet and gives you a sympathetic fuck.’ And I wanted so much to grab you there and then and give you a sound beating.”

I bit my lower lip so hard, it began to bleed slightly. Was this true? Was I so helpless? But I did not want his sympathy, and I hated his pity.

“But why me? I’m sure you can take your pity to someone else. Why me then? Am I your personal charity case?” I shot out vehemently, tripping over my own words, and as I heard them coming out of my mouth, I could feel the helplessness of it. I stared at him as coldly as I could, in silent defiance.

“I don’t know why. I don’t know why I’ve chosen you. I just did,” Shun replied, as he stirred his cup of mocha latte continuously, absent-mindedly, as if to blend his words into the murky mix. And he remained silent, his thoughts far away from mine, a world apart though we were sitting face to face in the Starbucks outlet in the university. The white noise of chatter and laughter from nearby tables drifted over in wisps. A young female student laughed heartily at the next table. A fly landed on Shun’s hand and he waved it away.

“I have an important client tonight who is organising a small orgy and wants the company of young men like us.” Shun looked into my face for any changes, and seeing no expression, continued with his proposal.

“He’s paying four thousand dollars for just one night. I want you to come along with me, we can split the money equally. Anyway, it’s good money.”

He stirred up the dregs of his drink with his straw, took a sip and pushed the cup away rudely, as if it was an abhorrent object he’d just discovered. I’d already taken part in several orgies by this time, so I was not squeamish about his request. But I wanted to refuse him, for the very sake of saying no to him, to deny him my dumb submission for once. But something in me, a pure rush of impulses, wanted to give in without hesitation. There was no reason to refuse him but there was no reason to acquiesce either.

“Come on, tell me, are you interested or not? If not, forget about it. Forget what I just said.” With that, he pulled back his seat and stood up. My heart leapt to follow him.

“Okay, okay, I’m in. Just tell me where and when. I will be there,” I said.

“I will call you later,” Shun replied casually, before grabbing his bag hanging from the seat, smiled at me and left the table. A heavy feeling overcame me and, like a ship’s anchor dropped into the depths, I was submerged and sunken.

* * *

The man answered the door almost immediately, as if he had been standing behind it, waiting anxiously for our arrival. He extended his hand solicitously and welcomed us.

“Hi, you’re finally here! We’ve been waiting! My name is Ben.” With that, he gestured us into the spacious living room of his bungalow. “For a while, we thought you guys were lost,” Ben said as he led us into the room. Which was almost impossible, I mused inwardly, since the bungalow stood apart from the rest of the houses along this stretch of road in the

obsequiousness of its lavish façade. No one with eyes could miss it. In any case, Shun and I took a taxi from our hostel. Along the journey, we hardly talked to each other, except to ask the perfunctory questions. Shun looked out his window at passing streetlights, at people waiting at bus stops, at the traffic, hardly acknowledging my presence, while I stole long glances at him from time to time.

But upon entering the house, Shun quickly reverted to his amiable, almost businesslike self, a stark contrast to his other self, five minutes ago. He took the initiative to answer all the questions posed by Ben with an old-school-friend candour.

The house was sparsely decorated and furnished, with Postmodern paintings hanging on several walls and a large faux-fur carpet covering the living room floor. A few men sitting on the couch looked up as we approached. There were three of them, smartly dressed in polo shirts and pants, drinking red wine, their faces slightly flushed. Like Ben, they were in their late thirties, professional looking, cultured and very loaded. The last bit of information was supplied by Shun when he called me that afternoon to inform me of the details of this orgy. All of them stood and began to introduce themselves. After which, one of the men, Chris, offered Shun and me each a glass of Pinot Noir.

We sat and began to chat. Shun turned to talk to the guy closest to him, a music company vice president named Tim, while I made chit-chat with Chris, an art gallery owner. While we talked, Ben and his live-in boyfriend Stan pulled away from us and began to whisper to one another animatedly, after which Ben turned to address the rest of the group.

“Guys, since we are all here, I don’t think we should waste any more time,” Ben remarked with a wink before adding, “Let’s go up to the room, shall we?”

With that, he grabbed hold of Stan's hand and began to lead the way. Chris, Tim and Shun stood up promptly and followed the two men. I held back momentarily, as the effects of the wine hit me. Shun looked back at me cursorily with a baleful frown. I got to my feet unsteadily and joined the group, my head pounding with spikes of brightness.

The bedroom was on the second floor of the house, at the further end. It was dimly lit with the warm orangish hues given off by two aluminum-cast table lamps. Stepping into the tepid room, I felt a rush of claustrophobia, as if the space had suddenly shrunk and was pressing in on all sides, pushing all of us together into this confining place. I drew in several inaudible breaths and oriented myself, trying to get a stable bearing. Ben and Stan had already stripped off their tops and were sandwiching Shun in their embrace, nudging him to take off his T-shirt, assisting him gently. Shun allowed them to strip him without any resistance. Meanwhile, Tim and Chris had surrounded me and were doing likewise, tugging at my shirt, undressing me as they moved their hungry hands over my body, as if appraising something they had just bought.

While they were undressing me, I looked over at the *ménage à trois* of Shun, Ben and Stan. By now, all of them were naked. With Shun between them, Ben and Stan were pressing their erections against his slender, muscular body, as they kissed his face and shoulders voraciously, like hunters savouring their prey. Shun seemed to luxuriate in their passion, perhaps even enjoying himself; I couldn't tell. As Shun kissed Ben full on his lips, he looked over at me piercingly. And with that look, I knew instinctively what he had been trying to convey for so long. He belonged to no one, not even me with my attraction and attachment. He refused to be claimed by anyone; no one should own him in any way. He chose to be free and his freedom created a wide chasm, uncrossable and unbridgeable.

A new wave of pain inundated me, numbing all my faculties and rendering them temporarily inoperative. I was devastated and dazed. But I had no time to think right then, with the hands of Chris and Tim all over me, caressing eagerly. I shut down my mind and gave myself over to them. I sought out Chris's mouth from the tangle of our bodies and kissed him hungrily. I did not hold back this time.

About the author:

O Thiam Chin's short stories have appeared in many literary anthologies and journals, including *Asia Literary Review*; *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*; *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*; *Kyoto Journal: Asiatic*; and *Asia Writes*. He is the author of three collections of short stories, *Free-Falling Man* (2006), *Never Been Better* (2009), longlisted for the 2010 Frank O' Connor Short Story Award, and *Under The Sun* (2010). He was an honorary fellow of the Iowa International Writing Program in 2010. Having just completed his fourth story collection, he is currently working on his first novel.

Less Than a Day

John Burdett, Thailand

Just because I'm going to Bangkok, doesn't mean I'll ...

Since he was talking to himself Fred didn't need to complete the sentence. His internal dialogue consisted mostly of such snippets: *loathe the exploitation of women ... anyway have a relationship ... whatever that means ... at least think I do ... giving it an effin good try anyway.*

He was in a business lounge at Heathrow. To prove his point to himself, he fished out his mobile and dialled a number he knew by heart, but had not yet assigned to autodial. It rang until her voice began reciting her automatic reply. She had gone out of her way to be charming to callers both known and anonymous: *do, do, try me again later, I'm in a meeting just now ...* Except she wasn't in a meeting. It was quite early Sunday morning. Fred had to leave the UK on his day off in order to start work on his assignment Monday night, in order to get back to the UK, the office and *her* before the end of the week.

He knew it would be quite a squeeze, but no reason why he couldn't manage. It was a straightforward story with a nice dark theme: middle-aged Englishman falls for Thai bargirl, buys a house in the country and a car for them, both of which he puts in her name: a magnificent two story Spanish-Asian fusion job with double car port and a Toyota 4x4. Then she dumps him. Legally both house and car are hers: he no longer has the right to live in his

own home. It turns out she had a boyfriend her own age just down the road in her village. Then, if that were not tragic enough, the poor guy—his name was James Conway, aged fifty-five—gets shot in the head when walking home from the local bar one night.

Cruelty and murder were like porn: readers were automatically hooked. And there were enough middle-aged Englishmen living with ex-bargirls, both in the UK and overseas—perhaps a little paranoid about their relationships—for the story to improve subscription numbers.

That's why Fred's editor wanted him to chase it. Fred was heterosexual and under thirty, which pretty much made him the obvious choice. More: Fred had spent a year in Paris, so he was cosmopolitan; it had to be him. Of course, the big-time media had broken the story already, for about a nanosecond. As far as Fred's editor knew, no one was doing it in depth though. Except Fred, who would end up spending a whole week of his life on it, if you took the travel time into account.

‘While you’re there, see if you can dig up a few more yarns, the kind we can store for a while … You know the sort of thing.’

Of course, Fred didn’t know the sort of thing, and neither did his editor, but any old dark stories would do. Everybody said what a lucky chap he was, whilst secretly relieved they didn’t have to go themselves: such a long trip, no friends out there, not as if he was going to a beach or anything truly exotic, the murder happened in deep country, a place called Isaan. And, let’s face it, Thailand, for all its charm, was Third World, even though it wasn’t PC to say so.

The fact that *she*—her name was Penny, but since he could not claim a romantic connection with any other woman, she appeared in his inner life as simply *she* or *her*—was not answering her phone caused a mild panic, a fluttering somewhere in his stomach. She knew he was at the airport, waiting

for a plane that would take him away for a week right at the beginning of their ... whatever it was. He sent a text message with a much jollier tone than he felt: *Off to the wild East in about an hour; missing you already.*

He hesitated before pressing *Send*. On an emotional level the message expressed a deeper commitment than either had agreed to so far. All they'd done was get drunk and stoned and have sex, but the sex had been *so* good—they'd discussed it in real time over their mobiles the next day—that a re-run was certainly on the cards. Apart from that, their budding romance was conducted electronically: texts for short *Hi theres*, emails for longer, more structured sentences: *God your tits are just, well, out of this world, I don't just mean size, I mean everything, shape, firmness, proportion ... I was thinking of them at five o'clock this morning ... Sorry if this is too, you know ...*

Don't worry, Sugarplum, I think we both had the bang of our lives, didn't we? I know I did. I never would have guessed you were so big ... I woke up thinking about your bits too ...

Love? Hardly, whatever *that* was, but a beginning of something that had a chance of survival? Maybe. He was just sick and tired of the endless chase for emotional stability, but you couldn't fess up to that, especially not *at the beginning*. Nobody could afford to be someone else's crutch & crotch for life, not if you wanted to stay in the race, keep upwardly mobile, pay off the mortgage on your studio flat, think about buying a decent car—finally. He pressed *Send*, anyway, wondering if he was being uncool. To be honest, he hoped for a reply within the minute. She took forty and, to his own astonishment, the wait caused him to come out in a cold sweat and an inner voice started saying nasty, vengeful things about *her*, until his phone whooshed—it was his main life style decision that he preferred whooshes to bleeps: *Have a great trip, see you when you get back, you lucky dog.*

No *missing you too*, he noted. And who was she with at nine o'clock on a

Sunday that she couldn't answer her phone or reply to a text message without making him wait more than half an hour? He felt the onset of depression. Then his phone whooshed again: *I'm gonna miss you too, Sugarplum.*

Now he felt like a million. The odd thing, of course, was that their relationship—if they had one—would not actually change at all. Neither had had time to meet again for the action replay, and they could text and email just the same while he was in Thailand as when they were ten miles apart in London. So, in terms of cyberspace, nothing was going to change over the next week. Was it?

Fred took out a book he'd bought the day before by some expat Brit who'd made a name for himself writing *noir* novels about Bangkok bargirls. He speed read it, skipping all the poverty-and-preaching stuff, grabbing what he needed. The main point was that Bangkok bargirls almost all came from this Isaan place, which was in the Northeast. He figured a smart move would be to spend Monday night doing the bars in Bangkok and learning about Isaan, so he'd have all the background he needed without having to schlep all over the countryside in a hire car. If he had any talent at all, he told himself, it was for finding the quickest smartest way to the guts of his stories.

2.

Fred wasn't sure of anything except it was Tuesday and there was a body in the bed next to him. When he adjusted his mobile to Thai time, it was still Tuesday, but much later in the day and the brown girl was turned away from him. He stood up to walk around the bed and look at her. His first reaction was to congratulate himself on his good taste. This was a truly beautiful woman, with high cheek bones and an elegant gauntness, full sweet lips. From the shape of the bed clothes, the rest of her was pretty well put together,

too. When she smiled he felt even more pleased with himself.

‘Hi. I’m Lalita.’

‘Right,’ Fred said. ‘I’m Fred.’

‘I know. I wasn’t drunk last night.’

Fred nodded thoughtfully. ‘Would you mind telling me what happened?’

‘You got drunk and kept telling me how beautiful I was. You paid my bar fine, so I had to look after you. You were going to ring the bell, but I stopped you.’ Her English was almost perfect, with a mid-Atlantic accent.

‘Bell?’

‘Every bar has a bell. If you ring it you have to buy everyone a drink. There were about fifty people there. I saved you about twenty thousand baht.’

He made the calculation. A thousand quid? Jesus. ‘Thanks.’

She smiled again. ‘But you were too drunk to get it up. You want to do it now?’

Fred blinked. ‘You want to?’

‘I don’t care. I want to get paid, but I’m not a beggar. So?’

He took a step forward, which brought him to the edge of the bed. He was naked except for his shorts, which she pulled down enough to expose his member. She rose to sit cross-legged on the bed, in T-shirt and panties. He watched her cup one hand under his testicles and, with the other, slowly, expertly, and tenderly produce an erection. She made sure it was good and firm before putting it in her mouth. After a minute or so she took it out again. ‘You want to come like this, or you want to fuck me?’

‘I don’t know,’ Fred said, still half drunk, ‘to tell the truth I think ...’ He put out a hand to steady himself on her thin shoulder. A spasm.

Now his sperm was all over her tiny brown hand. She shook it as if she was shaking off a cobweb. Suddenly anxious to save her from indignity—beauty had that effect on him—he grabbed a box of Kleenex that was on the

bedside table and handed it to her. She first cleaned him, then her hand.

‘Well,’ Fred said, still leaning on her shoulder and feeling dizzy.

She looked into his eyes. ‘You want me to stick around so you can do it properly? Or are you always like this? Are you alcoholic?’

‘How much d’you want?’

‘Two thousand baht, same as if you fucked me. That’s because I stayed the night with you.’

Two thousand baht: that was less than he’d spent on champagne on that one and only night with Penny. And it wasn’t even a full night. He’d had to get in his car at a freezing 3 am because she couldn’t sleep with someone else in the bed with her. ‘I understand.’

‘So?’

‘We don’t have to do it. Just stick around for an hour or so, I’d like to ask you some questions.’

‘Again?’

‘Was I that drunk? Did someone spike my drink?’

‘Why would anyone do that? Have you been looking at one of those websites?’

A pause while he looked around the room. ‘Maybe I do have a drink problem,’ he said, mostly to himself. He remembered, now, how wired he was when he hit the bars. When wired, he drank. It went with the job.

In London, if you wanted people to talk, you bought them drinks. No one likes to drink alone, so you drink with them.

He’d never had such a complete memory blackout before though. Maybe it was the jetlag. He shrugged. ‘Did I ask you about Isaan?’

‘Yes.’

‘And about that case?’

‘The English guy who got shot to death? Yes.’

Fred pulled his shorts back up and sat next to her on the bed. There was something deeply troubling about this situation that he could not quite put his finger on. She was so friendly, chummy even, like they were old pals. It wasn't right to feel this relaxed with a stranger, a whore, in a country he'd been in for less than a day. Culture shock: he couldn't think of anything so thoroughly un-British. Where was the paranoia on both sides, the mutual contempt between prostitute and client, the guilt, the nausea? And how was it he was starting to feel horny after he'd just come? That hadn't happened to him since he was sixteen. He slipped a hand up her back under the T-shirt, then round to her breasts. Full, young, firm. He felt that hand again, working the outside of his shorts this time. He groaned with a sense of foreboding: *If this is as good as it looks where the eff have I been all my life?*

She slipped out of her T-shirt and panties, pushed him back on the bed so she could pull his shorts off, straddled him, worked on both his and her private parts until both their bodies were ready for fluid exchange, then reached behind him to find a condom, which she spread wide and slipped on. Now she eased him inside her. He couldn't believe it. Exactly five and a half thrusts and he was jerking uncontrollably again. She eased herself off of him, carefully removed the clotted condom, cleaned him again, took the condom to the bathroom, returned, naked, with another of those incredible smiles.

‘Why are you crying, Fred?’

‘I don’t know,’ Fred said.

‘Don’t know?’

‘I think it might be because you’ve just made a fantasy come true, and that scares the living shit out of me.’

She blinked. He’d lost her in his culture shock. ‘You need an interpreter when you go to Isaan?’

‘Oh Christ yes,’ Fred said, wiping his cheeks with a Kleenex.

‘You’ll have to pay my bar fine for as long as it takes.’

‘Whatever,’ Fred said, ‘It’s all on expenses.’

‘Really?’

‘I mean the interpreting, not the sex.’

She pulled on her T-shirt and panties and fished a mobile out of a handbag. She spoke rapidly in Thai, then closed the phone. ‘You have to pay for a week, in advance. Give me the money so I can take it to the *mamasan* now. Or is a week too long?’

‘How about we make it a year?’ Fred said.

That made her laugh, an old-fashioned belly laugh like his granny used to have. In London they didn’t laugh like that anymore.

‘Eleven hours,’ Fred muttered, looking at his cellphone.

3.

‘D’you love me?’ Fred said.

‘Of course not,’ Lalita said, ‘I hardly know you.’ She smiled. ‘I love your money, though, and the way you’re being so nice to me.’

‘Aren’t your other customers nice to you?’

She thought about it. ‘English are mostly nice, but they drink too much and get hysterical. Germans are too harsh, but okay … Japanese are weird but have tons of dough and—’

‘Stop,’ Fred said. ‘D’you always have to be so honest?’

‘Why? In your country you’re not honest?’

‘No. We lie all the time.’

‘About what?’

‘Compared to you, everything.’ He let a beat pass, then added: ‘I love *you*, though.’

‘Liar.’

He’d let her drive the hire car. She explained that there were surely going to be cops to bribe sooner or later, and the bribes would be lower if she was at the wheel, rather than a *farang*.

‘So, are we near the village where that bloke was murdered?’

‘Not so far, but we’re not going there. We’re going to the village next door.’

‘Why?’

She frowned as if he were retarded. ‘Because at the village where he was murdered they won’t tell us anything. They’ll be afraid of losing face. At the village next door, they’ll tell us everything so the village where he was murdered will lose face.’

‘Got it,’ Fred said.

* * *

Paddy fields the dense green of pool tables, ramshackle wood houses on stilts. The roads were almost deserted except for a few pick-up trucks with farm labourers in the back, their faces swathed in cloths and T-shirts against the sun and dust. Lalita reached across to his crotch and squeezed.

‘You feeling horny?’ Fred said.

‘No. I almost never feel horny. I’m just taking care of you. I’m at work, don’t forget.’

‘You’re going to kill me with being so honest.’

‘You want me to shut up?’

‘Oh, no,’ Fred said. ‘I want to die this way. Please, keep up the torture.’

She laughed that laugh. He’d noticed that whenever death was mentioned, it made her laugh. She’d told him it was from Buddhism: death

was a kind of joke, once you got the message. Then she asked in a humble tone he'd not heard from her before if he minded if they stopped off for half an hour at her own village, which was on the way. Her grandmother was dying.

‘Sure,’ Fred said, ‘I have a thing about my own granny.’

‘You see her much?’

‘She’s dead.’

Lalita laughed.

* * *

He waited while she ran inside a small shack on stilts. Two kids played in a mud patch, an alcoholic grandfather sat and stared at him as if he wanted to kill him, an exhausted middle-aged woman in a worn grey sarong put her hands together to greet him. When Lalita ran out of the shack again, she introduced her mother. Then they were off.

‘Whose are the kids?’ Fred said.

‘My sister’s, but she did her head in with meths and they locked her away in the funny farm.’ She shrugged. ‘Someone has to give them a chance.’ She didn’t say it, she didn’t need to: that bunch of losers in the shack was the reason she sold her body. *And they’re not even her kids*, Fred thought, with an incredulity that was hard to live with.

4.

Fred said: ‘How come you speak such good English, Lalita?’

His memory of the night before had recovered somewhat. He recalled that apart from her good looks and great body, Lalita had stood out from all

the other girls for her mastery of the language—and superior intelligence. It was entirely possible that she had chosen him rather than the other way around. She could be playing him like a penny whistle—which didn't bother him at all. He was enjoying the tune.

‘I had a sponsor,’ Lalita said, ‘A *sugar daddy* as you call it. He was an engineer. English, but spent all his working life in the United States. That’s why I speak the way I do. I lived with him. I mean, he had a big apartment in Bangkok and I lived there full-time. He travelled all over Southeast Asia on his engineering assignments. When he was home, we spoke English, when he was away I studied English—there was nothing else to do. It was part of my contract with him that I wouldn’t take on other customers. I was only nineteen and my brain worked good.’

‘What happened?’

Fred saw something strange in Lalita’s face. He was not used to Thai features. He couldn’t tell if a memory was causing her extreme pain—or something else.

She inhaled heavily. ‘You really want to know what happened?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, see, he would often be away for months at a time, sometimes six months, and he said his work didn’t allow him to fool around with other women, so when he returned he was pretty horny. I wasn’t enough for him on the first nights back, so I had to arrange a threesome. I was fine with that, because it was always fun and relieved the pressure on me. I would find a girl in one of the bars which had upstairs rooms and I would have to tell her in advance what he wanted, otherwise everyone could get all tangled up and lose the moment. He liked to fuck me doggy-style while she lay underneath pointing the other way so she could lick his balls and his ass.

‘Now, to understand you have to know that while she was licking him he

couldn't move without interrupting her work and bumping her on the nose, so he would stay still and I would move in and out.' She gave Fred a glance.

'Okay,' Fred said.

'So, one night it was all going perfectly. She kept on licking and I kept on thrusting with my butt, except that it went on for a long time and he wasn't groaning the way he usually did. At first, I didn't think anything usual was happening because he'd taken a whole Viagra and was going to be stiff for hours anyway.

'I guess we went on like that for maybe twenty-five minutes or more, waiting for a tell-tale groan or two, and I was starting to get dry and her tongue was starting to ache before we realized he was having a seizure and couldn't speak or move. So we both got out from under him, but by the time we laid him on his back he was dead. You could say we'd been having sex with a corpse.'

Startled, Fred stared at her. She was biting her tongue.

'We ran to tell the *mamasan*, who came up and said we had to drag him downstairs because she wasn't supposed to rent out rooms for sex and she wanted it to look straight before she called the cops. But before we dragged him downstairs, she had to close the bar. So we did and the cops came and called for an ambulance and we were left with just us girls in the bar.'

'Okay.'

Lalita's face was trembling uncontrollably. For a moment, Fred wondered if she, too, was not having a seizure. Tears started to stream down her face. Now she exploded.

'It was just so fucking funny—all we girls and the *mamasan* had a party all night and drank the bar dry. I mean, out-of-control funny and shocking, too, which made it even more funny.' She struggled to keep her hands on the wheel in the grip of a prolonged belly laugh that caused her breasts to bounce

and her shoulders to shudder.

Fred gave her a few beats to recover. ‘You weren’t sad in any way?’

She caught her breath. ‘Why? He was a nice guy and had a great life, but how long was he going to live anyway? He was already fifty-six. Better to go that way than in a wheelchair sucking on an oxygen tube.’

‘Right,’ Fred said, scratching his jaw.

She flashed him a glance. ‘What’s the matter?’

Fred wasn’t entirely sure what the matter was. After a couple of minutes he said: ‘I think I’m the opposite to that bloke. I think I’ve been dead all my life and I’m only just coming alive.’

‘Maybe you’re not so different,’ Lalita said. ‘He told me he played it straight until he was thirty, followed all the rules and married a *farang* feminist who took everything including the kids. That’s when he saw the light.’

5.

‘Of course, *Khun* James Conway got shot: he was an asshole,’ the village headman said; at least, that was how Lalita interpreted his words—freely, Fred suspected. ‘He treated his wife like some kind of slave and he was in a bad mood all the time, always complaining. He had a drink problem and spent all his time at the bar. In the end they didn’t bother with *cans* of beer, they served him with packs of twelve.

‘He was an arrogant shit, always yelling and criticizing Thailand. How that guy could bitch! It was amazing. He could moan for hours about a cockroach crawling across the floor, on and on and on like a buffalo chewing grass. We know we’re poor and low class, but he didn’t have to rub it in like that. And he was a know-all—told the villagers how to do everything, even

told them how to live. And he was insulting about Buddhism.

‘His wife did her best for the first year. She was very patient and she’s young, only twenty-three now. Then she lost interest and went over to her uncle’s place to socialize with her cousins.’

‘She was unfaithful to him?’ Fred asked.

‘Of course not. She married him properly, village ceremony and the legal thing, both. Isaan women take that very seriously.’

‘Do you know who shot him?’

The headman shrugged. ‘Who would know such a thing? Anyone in that village would have shot him if they had the chance. They’re quite primitive over there. Maybe someone just happened to have a gun when they saw him walking down the street—a kind of accident, if you see what I mean. Or maybe they drew lots.’

‘What about the police investigation?’

The headman stared at Lalita and made a gesture toward Fred, then snapped out something in Thai: ‘What investigation? Why would the police be interested? He was going to get himself killed wherever he went, and if someone’s caught, they will bribe the police chief, so nobody will ever know who did it.’

Now both the headman and Lalita looked at Fred as if he were retarded. Fred didn’t know why he was enjoying it. ‘So he just got wasted for being an asshole?’ Fred summed up.

‘Right,’ Lalita said, not bothering to refer to the headman.

6.

Fred did his professional duty and checked out the village where James Conway was shot, even visited the Sino-Alicante monstrosity the Englishman

had built with its garish green tiles, blinding white walls and stark blue swimming pool.

They went on to the bar where he drank, the spot where he died. Nobody in the village would talk, not even to the point of saying where Conway's widow was now.

But Fred knew he was only going through the motions. When his mobile whooshed with a message from Penny (*Where are you Sugarplum? Look, I know I've been a bit standoffish, but I'm coming round, give me time and I'm yours, okay? Just don't go needy on me—you have that needy thing, frankly, and it scares me—I have to be all about me right now, that's all, nothing else in the way*), he muttered something obscene and deleted the message.

He'd already written the Conway story in his head. He was clever with words and would make the investigative reporting good and *noir*, but the message was plain for anyone with a brain: *Jerk had it coming*. He also knew how he would end the report: *By the way, I resign*. Then he walked with Lalita through the village to a meadow that sloped gently down to a bubbling brook.

‘Any land for sale here?’ Fred said.

‘Plenty. If you’re serious, we should go back to Bangkok, then I’ll return alone to negotiate—you will get a better price that way.’

‘All in your name, of course?’

‘It’s the only way.’

‘I want the house in wood on stilts. What about the car?’

‘It will be mine too; you can’t register in your name with a tourist visa. Don’t do it if you’re scared.’

‘I’m not,’ Fred said. ‘But if I turn into an asshole, don’t shoot me yourself. Let someone else do it. I wouldn’t want you to do jail time for a selfish slob like me.’ He thought he was making a joke, but his eyes teared.

Lalita was silent and frowning for a long moment. ‘You really can love me that quick?’

‘Oh, yeah,’ Fred said, then bellowed at the sky, ‘HEAD OVER EFFIN HEELS, DARLING—as my granny used to say.’

* * *

He checked his mobile. Twenty three hours and forty-one minutes since he’d landed.

About the author:

John Burdett was brought up in North London and attended Warwick University where he read English and American Literature. This left him largely unemployable until he re-trained as a barrister and went to work in Hong Kong. He made enough money there to retire early to write novels. To date he has published six novels, including the Bangkok series: *Bangkok 8*, *Bangkok Tattoo*, *Bangkok Haunts* and *The Godfather of Kathmandu*.

Aqua-Subculture

Lee Ee Leen, Malaysia

I sold beautiful curiosities in my shop, so it was only fitting that one walked in. However, it was not an antiques shop. My merchandise was a living example of years of human manipulation in enhancing specific genetic traits in fish. I stocked common goldfish, black goldfish supposed to guard the family home from bad *chi*, calicos, neon tetras, comets and bubble-eyed imported specimens. I rented a corner lot squeezed next to a dim sum restaurant in a neighbourhood shopping mall; contrary to what you may have overheard in the management office, my fish did not end up as fillings in the wantons served up for the lunchtime crowd. A week after I had expanded the shop to include marine fish, Andie sauntered through the door.

I tried not to stare at her. Beautiful women are often defensive and accompanied by protective items such as boyfriends and husbands. But she was alone, a towering, slim beauty whose physique almost blended in with the narrow shelves that overlooked the reef tank. With a Harley-Davidson biker's cap tilted over her face, she lured me out from behind the counter.

‘How much?’ She tapped the glass of the tank to indicate the black-and-white cleaner wrasse, darting around the bigger fish in the tank like harried waiters. For a natural tank janitor and a collector’s item, I recommended a cleaner shrimp, a miniature automaton coloured like a barbershop pole and

equipped with six jointed legs.

‘I am not a beginner,’ she stated in a lilting accent that was definitely not local. Her green contact lenses flashed in the fluorescent light. I was naive to think she was referring to her fish-keeping experience.

‘Come back in three days. Those wrasse are reserved.’ I lied.

Three days later, when I arrived at my shop, she was standing outside the shutter at a quarter to eleven. With those narrow hips wrapped in tight snakeskin jeans, she looked like a boy when viewed from behind. When she turned at the sound of my jangling keys, I saw her breasts constricted under a Boy London T-shirt. ‘Please wait outside, miss.’

I learnt her name after I had bagged a cleaner wrasse. The fish flailed as I handed her the plastic bag ‘It only has one hour before it suffocates.’

‘Kinky,’ she muttered as she took the bag. She was not wearing the green contact lenses this morning. I preferred her eyes naturally tawny. She told me her name because she was fed up with my calling her ‘Miss’ as if I were giving inept instructions to an artillery unit.

‘Andie,’ she said. ‘Like the actress, Andie Macdowell.’ She paused and waited for my response, as if I had flubbed a line of dialogue.

‘I wasn’t named after someone famous.’ I told her after some hesitation. I wished I was called Jacques as an alternative to my pedestrian moniker, Jack. When I was young, I saw a documentary on TV about Jacques Cousteau, the French underwater explorer. But local mispronunciation would flub the Gallic inflection of Jacques, and make it sound more like Jock.

Andie laughed and removed her biker cap. Her black hair fell to the waistband of her jeans. She looked like a mermaid, the black tresses and their green iridescence shimmering above the scaly *faux* snakeskin.

* * *

We met under the fibreglass model of a whale shark in the aquaria in Kuala Lumpur City Centre. I suggested the trip as a natural progression of shared interests. The aquaria were divided into biotopes: coral reef, Amazon River, Malaysian rainforest and mangrove swamp. A tunnel lit by neon-blue track lights connected each biotope.

‘Arapaimas mate for life,’ I point out to Andie at the Amazon River tank. Two behemoths drift past us in the green water, their bony heads etched with curlicues and ridged scars.

‘Fools.’ She set her lips together in a compressed line.

‘Sea slugs are hermaphrodites—but can’t self-fertilize. They still need a partner,’ Andie informed me as she pressed her palm on the reinforced glass of the cylinder tank for invertebrates. A specimen unfurled its fuchsia plumes as it clambered over a Venus’ Flower Basket, a glassy hollow sponge that imprisons a pair of male and female shrimp for life.

We followed yellow arrows plastered to the wall of the tunnel to the special aquaria exhibit of the month—Australian sea snakes. A large open tank was covered with mesh wire, flanked by signs that unnecessarily warned visitors not to put their hands inside the tank. I peered through the wire and saw two banded sea snakes entwined in a tight double helix, their bodies rippling together in gentle languor. Inspired by this demonstration, Andie slipped her arms around my waist and squeezed until I jerked in pain.

I guided Andie to the shark tank, expecting a little more tenderness from her. A nurse shark burrowed its snout into the sand, scavenging for leftovers. The PA crackled and a voice announced feeding time. Kids rushed to the glass as a diver descended into the tank clutching a wire mesh bag of frozen fish. The diver dealt out the fish like an underwater Jesus feeding the five thousand; the food in the bag did not run out.

Aware of his audience, the diver let his hand linger in the maw of a black-tip reef shark to the shrieks of alarm from the children. Andie smiled at this spectacle, her lips stretched back, revealing teeth that overcrowded her mouth. She was all torpedo sleekness in a grey, sleeveless dress.

We exited the aquaria and flowed into the lunchtime crowd.

Andie stayed in a service apartment opposite KLCC. A basket of fruit on the coffee table enhanced the sparseness of the living room. I noted the absence of an aquarium.

‘What did you do with the wrasse?’

‘I bought it as a gift.’ She waved her hand around as if the question were lingering cigarette smoke and changed the subject. ‘Are you hungry?’

We phoned for sushi from a Japanese restaurant near KLCC that provided delivery. Our food would arrive in thirty minutes. Andie selected a pomegranate from the fruit basket. As she started peeling away the skin of the fruit, she told me a story.

A beautiful girl was born to a Thai mother and Swiss father. Her father left not long after she was born. When the girl came of age, she found out that she was different from her friends. She looked like a girl, but was not one on the inside.

‘How so?’ I asked Andie.

‘She can’t have children. She has no womb,’ Andie replied, and with the sudden shift to present tense, I realized she was talking about herself. Andie had Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome; her body had resisted the development into a male by remaining stubbornly feminine. She was not a transsexual and she hated the term ‘intersex’.

‘I’m not a freak!’ Andie ranted, ‘I’m not caught between the two sexes. Males and females are the ones who are strange, because they are the ones who are incomplete. Women are always searching for their other halves and

all that magazine bullshit.'

Andie took a deep breath, piled the pomegranate seeds into a glass bowl and joined me on the sofa. She put her head in my lap and asked me to drop the seeds into her mouth. I asked her what I had done to earn this pleasure.

'I just spent a whole afternoon with you,' she smiled up at me. 'And you're the first guy I've met around here who doesn't ask dumb questions about me. You live in the "now". Suppose it comes from watching fish all the time.'

The seeds burst with a tart pop. As the juice spilled, it stained my fingertips scarlet. Like the diver with the shark, I let my fingers remain between her lips for a second too long. She sucked and nipped the pads of my finger, not quite playful. If she drew any of my blood, it mingled with the juice.

Over one of our sushi dinners, I mentioned mating to Andie, about how marine creatures did not go through the awkwardness of sex on dry land. When she had cleared her plate, she went to the bathroom. Andie called for me after ten minutes. I heard the taps running from outside and knocked on the bathroom door.

She poured in the bath salts and the foam and issued me instructions: 'Don't turn around until I say so.'

I heard the taps running, water gushing out. Inspired, I invented a name for a new cocktail: 'Sex in the Bath'. Foam spilled over the rim on the bathtub and drifted over to my bare feet.

'You can look now.'

Andie had skimmed off a layer of thick foam and fashioned a bikini out of it: bubbles shining on her wet skin like sequins sewn onto a body stocking.

The water sloshed around as I climbed inside the tub. I lifted aside a handful of wet hair pressed against her shoulder blades, strands of kelp left

on white sand at high tide. The strap of lather on one shoulder had split. I nipped and rasped my teeth along the ridge of a collarbone until I reached the notch at the base of her neck. I dipped my tongue in, the skin tasting salty the same as the mussels at dinner a few hours before. The rest of the makeshift bra had dissolved, exposing her tiny rosewood nipples. My hand reached between her thighs and sought out her niche, fingers discovering that her hole was as shallow as a navel. Andie gasped and shoved me back with the contained violence of a self-defence class. We slid in rhythm against the wall of the tub. Male sea snakes cannot disengage from females until mating is complete.

* * *

My livingroom had a built-in marine aquarium, equipped with backlit glass, harsh and vivid like a screensaver. The cleaner shrimp from my shop were servicing a blue-striped angelfish.

‘Humans think they can study animals in tanks and cages, and put them into categories.’

Dressed in a terry-wrap robe, Andie walked over to the window, her profile slashed into shadows by the Venetian blinds. Her rants began like our lovemaking, a sharp tangential stab in a random location, growing in intensity as she located an available target.

I tried to distract her. I pointed to the aquarium. ‘Are you talking about my fish?’

‘You make them sound like they’re your property.’

I went over and put my arms around her to soothe her displeasure.

‘You don’t own me—I’m not one of the fish in your shop.’

‘I have a duty to my shop.’

‘Your shop is your property, which has its own set of conditions. She loosened the belt on the robe and opened it before taking my hand and pressing it on her soft breast, ‘Duty is unconditional. When you’re with me, you are beyond all that.’

‘No.’ I struggled to deny my body’s responses. ‘Can we talk about you? Or us??’

Andie rolled her eyes at me and pushed me back towards the sofa. ‘Remember the deal, Jack? You don’t ask dumb questions about me or anything. We enjoy what we can when we can.’

On the sofa, the bathrobe fell down around Andie as she climbed above me, a goddess holding up the canopy of the night sky with her body. It was dim under her robe as the moist velvets of our mouths mingled. When she placed her mouth around what she humourously called my ‘seahorse’, I forgot about duty or business.

* * *

Andie was right; my shop was my property and my duty although I had been neglecting it. Dead live food drifted in plastic basins, air pumps broke down and filters clogged up with algae and gave off the metallic tang of nitrates. My courtesy transformed into curtness with customers. As families waited for a table outside the dim sum restaurant, they allowed their children to wander into my shop. I shooed them away with a broomstick, annoyed that these conventional lives and their offspring had intruded into my floating world.

A man entered the shop, tall and white-haired, his skin so tanned that it gave off a violet lustre in the strip lights of the fish tanks. His appearance attested to a life spent under the sun. The juxtaposition was odd; what was

his interest in an indoor hobby like aquarium fish-keeping? I realized the connection when he put a plastic bag on the counter; the cleaner wrasse was swimming inside.

‘I’m returning the wrasse. My wife told me she bought it from here,’ he said with a faint European accent.

I did not answer and tightened my grip on the broom handle. Andie had lied to me about her marital status. Deceived as I was, I had no desire to be killed by a jealous husband.

‘Okay, relax.’ He held up a gnarled hand to assuage me. ‘My ex-wife. Well, not until she signs the papers. If she signs them.’

I waited for him to get interrogative. Would he ask me to step outside for a fistfight in front of the dim sum restaurant? When I still did not speak, he said, ‘Thank you.’

‘What for?’

‘Andie has no real friends in KL. I suggested a change of scene to her. We even bought a studio apartment in Mont Kiara last year.’ He pushed the wrasse towards me. ‘Since no one’s going to live there now, there’s no need to decorate it.’

I opened the till to give him a refund for the fish.

‘No, please. I insist.’ He refused the money. I asked him what was his job. ‘I own a scuba-diving school in Thailand. Hey, maybe you should try it one day.’

I ignored his offer and blurted, ‘Do you still have feelings for Andie?’

He smiled as if I had articulated something he could not admit to himself. ‘We live apart, but we are not separated. She goes and returns. Nothing’s definite with her and that’s the deal.’

‘I know.’ I agreed and thought of the male and female shrimp inside the Venus Flower Basket, an arrangement of complete security but defined by

soft translucent bars.

* * *

Andie sent a blank email with a photo attachment to my business mail address; a fuzzy snapshot of sea snakes mating, taken with an underwater camera. I replied with a brief thank you and never heard from her again.

My customers thought I had closed my shop for a month. Instead, I renovated it and got rid of the marine fish and invertebrate tanks. I applied for a license to sell dogs and cats. The shop was noisier with barks and meows, but at least it distracted me from thinking about Andie. My new employees did not understand why I was obsessed with checking the sex of new puppies and kittens. I was looking for recurrences of Andie's condition in nature.

Of course, I never found any, but conventional family life found me when a petite woman walked into my shop one evening, tearful that her boyfriend had stood her up outside the dim sum restaurant.

However, my fiancé baulked at making love in the bathtub. She told me I could get hurt. She did not understand when I replied that I had already been hurt that way.

About the author:

Lee Ee Leen was born in London, UK. She has an MA in English from Royal Holloway College, University of London. In 2009 she was shortlisted for MPH Alliance Bank National Short Story Award and she has reviewed films for *The Directory of World Cinema: American Independent* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2010).

Mad For It

Erich R. Sysak, Thailand

So I'm in Phuket, Thailand, just a few weeks and I get a job teaching English. I need a clock to remind me to wake up. I want a big damn clock on the wall ticking like crazy. I go to Tesco in my tie and blue silk shirt and see an amazing Thai girl, about 27. Hair cut to the shoulders, wide mouth, a narrow waist that makes her hips and heavy breasts pull your eyes. Some women have this sexual power, like a love potion that people drink up. Karl Jung says it is a projection of the soul or *anima*. Walt Whitman says *steer for the deep waters only*.

Enter Goy and my first chance at exotic True Love. A long neck. Yearning in the face and dark eyes. A relaxed, nurturing vibe amplified by our struggle to communicate as she shows me how to work the clock. My arm brushes against her nipple as she winds up the mechanism. I'm happily swimming out to dark waters. A puff of her cream and cinnamon smell rises to my nostrils. But when I take the clock home, I just can't get it to work.

A few days later I come back, see her in jeans and a red blouse with SAME SAME on the curvy front. Somehow I get her in the mood and a short while later we're upstairs in the cafeteria eating Japanese dumplings and fish sauce. She crosses her legs and laughs at me staring. Her toes are painted black. Even her feet are candy.

Her ex was a butterfly. She has a 3-year-old daughter back in Isaan. Phuket has all the decent jobs, but she misses the rubber tree farm back home. She's been working at Tesco five months and dealing with 12-hour days. She sends roughly one hundred dollars home each month. Half her salary.

She lives in a one-room apartment and eats cheap dinners. She's looking for the right man to save her. Show her the good life. And she's a swimmer. Her one day off: Sunday. She doesn't believe I'll take her to the beach, which is just as sweet as milk, so we find a shop and I pay for a white bikini. She puts it on at the back of the store and pulls the curtain back for three seconds to let me peek. Time slows. I see deep into her eyes. I see the dark circles of her nipples. I think red wine and French movies. Deserted beaches. Crazy, deep sex. TL.

Time goes on and life is paradise. Better than selling hard drives and meeting co-workers for after-dinner mimosas at Bennigans in America. I never think of the NFL or sitcoms or politics. She teaches me Thai. I teach her English. I feel deep, emotional thrumming in my stomach when we fuck.

* * *

Until she comes home one night a different woman. Wouldn't talk. Shrugs off my hands. Pouts like a little girl and it isn't sexy. There's a cold, white pallor to her face that just looks mean. Says she doesn't like work. The other girls gossip about her because she's with a *farang* and not married. She wants to quit work and take care of me. She wants money. Maybe move back to the farm and build a house in a rice field. Her parents need funds for everything: hospitals, food, booze, happiness. And then there's a dowry. A big one. I can't live without beaches and the ocean. I don't eat much rice.

And I didn't leave California with my pockets full of gold. About 20k

in the bank and an old Taylor guitar on my back. I chew on *dowry* for a week or two, but she doesn't like delays. I came to Thailand because I can live in a bungalow near the beach, swim every day and eat mango, coconut and banana. Drink red wine. She locks herself in my bedroom and talks on her cellphone for hours. Comes out in a denim mini-skirt and heels and leaves me alone until midnight. I'm licking paint off the walls. She gets distant. Starts the going out thing a few times a week. I try to follow her once, but get lost in the mountains. I'm on a steep, dark incline. No streetlights. Weird sounds from the forest. A cool and ominous wind shakes the trees. I'm the only man on the planet. On the way down, I crash into a guard rail. Call her for help, but she doesn't answer. I know she's fucking around. But it feels like a way out. I didn't come to Thailand to be a wingman.

That night, I put her on the couch and yank at her twenty-dollar satin panties until she cries. I want proof. I want revenge. She buries her face in my shoulder. Tears soak through my shirt. I find her lips. My heart thumps. She sits on my lap and does this squeezing thing she can do with her vagina I don't understand and I let it go.

But it isn't back to normal. So I give her 500 dollars for her parents to do whatever. It makes her happy for a while. Pancakes and cheeseburgers fly out of our little kitchen. She buys a bus ticket home to deliver the money and quits her job. Which isn't exactly what I want, but the sex is so damn magical. She's so high on things, so full of trust that she brings me a piece of paper with 'You're a very special person. I don't want to lose contact with you' written on it in her handwriting. She says her friend got it as an SMS and she wants to know what it means. Yeah, right. I tell her what it means and wave goodbye as she climbs on the midnight bus to Korat.

I can't let it go. When she gets back, I demand to see her cellphone messages. She is good with the phone and when she opens the inbox, she

deletes the first two before I have a chance to read them. Everything else is in Thai. I make her drive to DTAC and get the phone records. I read them standing in the mall and the names are all Thai. Maybe I was wrong. I feel bad. So I walk through the mall and see a travel agent. A lot of colorful brochures and long-tailed speed boats. I buy two tickets to the Phi Phi islands. Promise I will teach her to SCUBA dive. On the way back, she says, 'If you ever catch me lying, throw me out.' That really hits me. I was all wrong about her. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever known inside and out.

I buy two gold rings and carry them around in my pocket for a week. There is no place I can hide them in the house. She knows every spot. I walk around with my fingers in my pocket and dream.

On the night before the trip, she asks me when we have to leave. I say 7 a.m. She says she needs to go to the market before we take off, about 6. I ask her what she needs to buy. She says I don't know. Doesn't sound right at all. So in the morning, she's getting dressed and so am I. What are you doing, she asks. Going to the market, I say. She has a fit right there. Throws a coffee cup against the wall. Coffee splatters all over my art books. Glass on the floor. I think love is going to kill me. She goes alone and I just know what it is. I know.

When she's gone, I check my mail and the Internet saves me. She doesn't flush her cache from the night before because we were packing and eating and talking and I see where she was browsing: on this hook-up site called Tagged. Her profile just pops right up. She's got pictures I took of her in that damn bikini at the pool in the clubhouse. Says she likes a man who knows what he wants and hip-hop music. She's got friends. Lots of young European dudes with crew cuts. They look like football stars.

When you're 53, you know what's good for your soul. I've got a long history of great failure and great success. Western Digital paid me buckets

to run the marketing. And I had a network of clients that locked me in. Took eleven years to go from copy writer to Big Dick. And when I got to the top, I didn't want to be there. I couldn't stop thinking about teaching music to kids or learning to sail, diving the reefs off the Catalina Islands. The trend went all the way back to Little League baseball. Best player on the team and then my mind turned to reefer and sci-fi novels which turned into a stint of guitar playing and modal jazz. I'm good for ten seconds at everything, and then it's over.

So I have my life-size epiphany in Stowe, Vermont, at this big marketing dinner paid for by Compaq with too much wine. I raise my hands to silence the table, then throw the question out. What's the absolute best thing in life? Everyone quickly agrees: true love.

It was all the proof I needed. Proof that the one thing I really wanted was TL. A deep, serious, honest connection with a fantastic woman was the one consistent theme of my life. And I admit Thai women had a certain appeal, a promise of youth and good odds. But I wasn't taking the exploitation angle seriously. Have you ever known one thing to be the way you hear it on the news or in the hallways at work? For me, never. I have to see things for myself.

But I'm not angry with Goy. What's the point? I just want to get rid of her now with as little conflict as possible and get on with my quest. I do love her, but I can't live with her. She's a devil. You know what I mean. We go to Phi Phi and I have the best three days of my life. Snorkeling in the glassy water. She takes me into the bushes behind the beach. Not a soul around except us and she fucks me as I sit on a pile of sand. She sucks my cock right there and her mouth is wet and shiny. She looks up at me with those tender eyes. And I lift her into my lap. Her cheeks feel damp on my fingers. I spread them and pull her close to my bulge. She groans and puts her hands on my

shoulders. My cock juts out to find her hole. I feel her muscles squeeze in on me.

When she pulls my head down to suck her nipples, I see two Thai girls behind a coconut tree watching us. Goy looks, too, and she twitches somewhere deep inside. She looks back at me with a lewd smile on her face as I explode to the rhythm of a frantic popping sound coming from her groin. This is one woman it will be hard to forget.

* * *

On the last day, we're sitting in the restaurant. I'm drinking from a coconut. She's nibbling at sour mango. 'Goy,' I say, 'I will never be a rich man. You deserve a rich man who can take care of you and your family. I'll help you find this man. I can help you decide.' That's when I did become a wingman, but for a woman.

She confesses to wanting more on the financial end. It isn't her exactly, but her family that demands she marry someone wealthy to take care of them back in Isaan. An American woman just wouldn't think this way, but Thai women do. It's a different culture and you can't fight it. I wouldn't fight. I would use it.

When we get back, I look over her profile on Tagged. She shows me her friends, which ones she likes. We feel closer than ever now that the truth is out between us. I even read her messages from hundreds and hundreds of men. We're a desperate bunch. When I look at those messages to Goy I see us as conniving, weak, blathering wimps. It's just as ugly to me as it is to Goy and I imagine any other woman who reads such junk. First, I change her pictures. Not so sexy, more Bambi-esque. She really can hook you with those big eyes and smile. I re-write her profile. She wants a little danger in

her life and she can't afford it on her own. She wants sunset cruises and a candy-apple red Honda Jazz. Are you the man for her?

The replies flood in. The liars are easy to spot. As we read the messages, she sits on my lap and I put my hands on her breasts and pull her big nipples. I get hard every time we do this. She tells me I have the biggest cock she's ever sucked. She can be so nasty. We read messages from doctors who can't spell simple words. CEOs who offer to send money right away. They offer plane tickets to Ireland, Norway, California, Geneva.

It's the moderate replies that I read with interest. The guys who want to know more and don't tout money. If you have it, you usually keep quiet about it or at least don't think about it too much.

I steer Goy to a retired, South African internist. Fifty-six. Says his wife died six years ago from cancer. He's retired to Phuket. Been living on the island one year. Knows just enough to want a cute Thai girl haunting his condominium hallways and bedrooms. Looks to be in good shape. Gray hair, but lots of it. A wedge-shaped haircut full of expensive gel. Big shoulders. Deck shoes. An honest smile. It is the smile that gets Goy. Says he looks kind. Whatever.

Goy agrees to meet him at the Natural Restaurant in Phuket Town. I drive her there and drop her off at the corner. She wobbles on her white heels up the sidewalk and I feel a terrible pain at the thought I'm making a crucial mistake I can't fix. Too many of these crucial mistakes and life kills you for sure or gives you psoriasis.

I'm up all night staring at the guy's profile on Tagged. I click the pictures over and over, looking for something and I don't know what. I walk up and down the living room floor with a hard-on and keep looking at my cellphone to see if I've missed a message. An hour is like five thousand years.

We didn't talk about sex. We didn't agree on any rules. It's about her.

About her finding the right guy. Two-thirty, there's a little knock on the door. I'm wide awake. Savage in the eyes. She walks straight past me. I smell wine on her dress, the ocean at midnight. I call to her. I want the story. I want the details, but she shakes her head no and goes to the bedroom, shuts the door and locks it.

I go back to the computer right then. I know all of the buttons on Tagged and whip up my own profile. I post the picture from Phi Phi when I looked away from Goy in disgust as she happily snapped pics with the digital camera I bought for her. You can see the beach and the waves as a reflection in my Ray-Bans. I have my hands clenched in an expression of ultimate confidence. I find three more pics and load them up. Nothing sweet. They are manly, active pictures of the beach, a sailboat and me feeding rice to a neighbourhood stray dog. I have one pic with a Toyota 4x4 behind me and the door open. It looks like mine, but it isn't. I load that too.

Then I write a message. I cut and paste it and send it to almost fifty women who live on the island and grade at least a seven out of ten. It's a theory. The Wild 7. The tens are too beautiful and in Thailand, their beauty is a major asset. Perhaps all they have. And a lot of the other important qualities may not be there: humility, wit, sincerity. It's the slightly under-appreciated woman who has long-term possibilities. I want a girl who isn't a slave to her family. Who swims. Who doesn't worry if her skin gets too dark.

Then Goy appears from the bedroom. She sits in my lap and stares at my new Tagged profile on the computer screen. A wounded look appears in her little-girl eyes. I feel her satin panties against my thighs. She slides her arms around me. She lifts her brown nipple to my mouth. Her skin is soft and sends pulses of light through my body. I take her nipple in my mouth and it swells. I love the brown color, the rubbery feel of it in my teeth. Every part of her touches a part of me. She kisses me deeply and I regret it all as her

hand pulls my throbbing cock out. I love her. She has it all. She pulls at it and I feel her long fingers curling around my head. We finally agree to stop torturing each other. She says she won't meet any more men on Tagged and I won't meet any women. She takes her soft fingers away just before I come. She'll get a job at one of the hotels and save money. I promise to help her more when I can.

She shows me an SMS from the doctor that proves they didn't have sex. The doctor says in the message that he wishes they had made love in the hot tub that night. Next time, he says. But there won't be a next time for him. I'm taking his next time and the next one too. TL isn't easy. But you have to hold on to it when you get it. She pulls her other leg over my head and lifts her ass. I guide her down onto my shaft and moan as I enter her. I am young again and will be inside of her forever.

But the truth is, we are living in a romantic dream that lasts only a few more weeks. Because she can't turn away from her own damaged search. And I know every good romance ends in death. It starts with a love potion. And the potion confuses everything that's real. The potion makes you do things that just don't make sense. Then you have a story and the story is full of lies and full of truth and there's no way to untangle it without a lot of difficulty. True Love. Whitman says, *I am mad for it to be in contact with me.*

Six months have passed, and Goy has what she wants now. She was on Tagged all along and that's no surprise. She lives in a mansion at Nai Harn Hill just above my favourite beach with a retired millionaire. He's Dutch. The owner of a shopping mall. He's overweight, hideous and shrewd. Goy hates him and gets everything she wants: a monthly salary, cooking school, that awful Honda Jazz and driving lessons. When I swim out to the bay, I can look back at the hill and just see the silver top of her water tower. I float in the bay and look up at it shining.

I've seen her a few times since she moved five months ago. We have sex sometimes and she cries after, but won't tell me why. When I see her, I feel elated, and when we part, I feel relieved.

On my 54th birthday, I get an SMS from her. It says: I will always love only you.

And I will love only her, but she is gone from me and we will never have those beaches again. My madness is wanting her again, but knowing she is all wrong. What have I learned? Whitman was right about everything.

About the author:

Erich R. Sysak grew up in Florida and New Orleans, but now lives in the northeast of Thailand. He works a small mango farm, reads and writes crime novels and teaches. His stories have appeared in *Oxford Magazine*, *storySouth*, *the Paumanok Review*, *42 Opus*, *Ducts*, and *Pindeldyboz*. He has also written two crime novels that are available as e-books.

Self-Portrait With Three Monkeys

Christopher Mooney-Singh, Singapore

He kept thrashing and crashing around on top of her, making the required efforts to reach his record-time orgasm. If there had been an Olympic category for ‘wham-bam-thank-you-Ma’am’ sex, he would have easily made the team, she thought. It happened all too often: the big build-up over dinner and hanging out at Bar None had led to another unsatisfying conclusion. Now the performance was over. He withdrew himself, limp and spent, rolled off to his side of the bed, sweating on the sheet. Francisca had learned not to expect fireworks, yet she did hope for slow, practiced arousal—or perhaps a little humour along the way.

He let out a deep yawn. “Very tired, lah.”

He looked across the room, taking in the easel next to the dresser. “Hey, you also paint, ah. Very sexy! This one, who, ah?

She cringed. *Oh God! What to tell him?* But before Francisca could answer, he had turned over and was off to count sheep or naked pole-dancers, or whatever he did to fall asleep. She half-muttered to herself, “*Yes, why don’t you make yourself at home, ‘Stud’!*”

He was asleep now, but his words echoed on like the ghost of an insincere idea. Did he not see her resemblance in the unfinished portrait? *Well, what do you expect! You didn’t hook up with an art lover, did you?*

Francisca's sagging, forty-eight-year-old body had been raging and partying for years, progressing like flaming octane through the clubber's long, dark night of the soul.

She left the bed and went to clean up in the bathroom. When she returned, she sat down at the dresser-mirror. Soon, the numbskull sparrows would be up in the Flame of the Forest tree outside her window. Before long, the tropical sun would be getting her and the workers off to their office blocks for another day's spreadsheets and marketing campaigns and the food courts would be queued up with hung-over monsters craving for *kopi* and *kaya* toast. Her mouth tasted of cigarettes and sour margaritas.

She looked at the black waterfall of her hair draped over the red silk gown embroidered with tigers. Ah, her smeared mascara. At the end of her life, would she be still picking up guys in bars until the last round of drinks? She really was too old for this now. Her biological time-bomb was beginning to tick louder between heartbeats. Too old for kids. She had some cash in the bank for a trip or two, but to where and with whom? The "who" in bed, reflected in the mirror, was just another jerk in post-coital whale-slumber. The sex and booze had done the job for him: out like a light. *Typical!* But she was still turned on like flashing neon.

Next to her on the easel was the nearly finished canvas. She stood up to look at it—a voluptuous nude. She flashed back to the mirror—then to the canvas, then the mirror again. She undid the red silk dressing gown at the waist and opened herself for objective appraisal. *Who is this person? Do I still know her?* The breasts were certainly not as perky as a twenty-year-old's and she saw the evidence of a little—dare she say it—paunch! *My God! A man's word for a woman's tummy. What is happening to me?* There was some shadow of fuzz on the upper lip, a stray hair or two on the chin these days growing faster between tweezer attacks. Yes, Francisca was losing her

soft feminine edge to a menopausal creature known as Fran the frump. She was becoming thick brush strokes, like a Rouault painting: man-solid, deep-vowelled.

Yet it wasn't the bagginess of her skin that disturbed her so much as what it all stood for: no partner, no family, no orthodox identity except an executive position which was now under attack from those "Hello Kitties" scratching at her heels. She had to keep on top, swat them like flies ... She was known as a tough nut to crack in her industry, but under that hard shell, she was sensitive: someone who tried to manifest her realness through one-woman shows in a friend's art gallery. Alas, she was only a part-time artist in a Sunday-painter country with little art appreciation or market potential. Francisca reached for the cleanser and tissues and began clearing up the mascara-disaster area.

* * *

"Oh God," she shuddered, closing her eyes in fright. She stood up, turning to look at the bed where the whale-man was snoring. She turned her back, leaning against the window, looking at the self-portrait. She needed comforting, so she closed her eyes again and let a well-trained finger stray below the embarrassing belly to the bearded-lady lips of herself and, imagining her finger as a delicate paintbrush, started doing what she normally did at the easel: shutting out the left-over white noise of her workday to look for that other Face, the ideal woman within herself. She then began to re-create its lines and contours, working her finger-brush this way and that.

The sexual heat began to build like the first kindling placed on a match-blaze. It grew gradually with focus and effort to twig-bright redness. She kept her eyes closed and felt her left calf muscle going taut as a bowstring

as her body remembered this fiery dance for one—all the while dwelling on the image of the younger woman she knew so well, the one she had starved, exercised, then bounced through nightclubs and parties with European men and big expense accounts.

This laughing, joking woman had been the wild one with a reputation for doing the most daring things in beachfront chalets all weekend long. She warmed to that bright young image as she worked the finger-brush, painting a face like a miniature portrait on the red ruby of her clitoris—a face all lips and tongue now finding the sweet-spot. Rising on her toes she embraced the full force of her orgasm, shuddering with hot, delicious stabs.

Feeling revitalized, she imagined a new beginning with a clean slate and felt her feet soften into the floor again. As she opened her eyes to the reddened cheeks of a woman flashed sideways in the mirror, Francisca realized she was still that empowered woman. She was not down-and-out. She didn't need the man-whale beached in the bed behind her. No one had ensnared her in any domestic tussle. She had a job, she had her house (almost paid off), she had her CPF savings. All was not lost. Above all, there was her art. Yes, that had always served even if it didn't make any money. She could still paint, could still create. Francisca still had a way of being honest with herself, despite the prowling diversions of her tiger-woman lifestyle.

* * *

The morning light was just beginning to do its little halo-dance around the outlines of apartment blocks. A shaft of it began to walk a finger through the slit in the curtain. Francisca took it as a signal to action and stepped up to the canvas. She lifted a brush from the Chinese inkstand on the table next to the easel where she kept her materials. She looked at the green soapstone

piece carved with three monkeys ascending a mountain. The pool at the bottom was the muddy pot that she now dabbed into like a water-bird taking a morning drink.

How strange! The climbing monkeys now seemed to be laughing and joking. *How foolish one can be, possessed by moods and darkness.* Francisca grabbed her palate and felt like flinging it up like pizza dough, but restrained herself. Instead, she squeezed out some colour onto its paint-scarred face, then began intoning her mock mantra as she did before commencing any work at the easel: *See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.*

Such a silly saying, yet for her it meant that she could turn a blind eye to the necessary sins of her day job. She didn't have to listen to the bleating voices of family expectations and she wouldn't ever have to speak again to this latest jerk slumbering in her bed, once she sent him off without breakfast. She focused her eyebrows as if she was a mathematician searching for a way to crack the formula.

With her brush, she added a few final touches around the lips and softened the lines of the painted tummy, then signed the portrait in the bottom right hand corner. Then she moistened her finger with her own wetness, dipped it in the red paint on the palate and, with a flourish, dotted the "i".

About the author:

Chris Mooney-Singh is a full-time writer, publisher and literary worker. The recipient of several grants from Singapore's National Arts Council, he has travelled to many international festivals and events. Mooney-Singh co-edited *The Penguin Book of Christmas Poems* (Penguin Books Australia) and his last two books were *The Taxi Buddha Cab Company* and *The Bearded Chameleon*. Recently returned to play and fiction writing, four of his short

stories were featured in *Best of Singapore Erotica, Love and Lust in Singapore* and *Crime Scene: Singapore* published by Monsoon Books. Chris Mooney-Singh continues to write longish short fiction and his new book of poems The Bearded Chameleon was recently released in Singapore and Australia.

A Perfect Exit

Aaron Ang, Singapore

If you could, would you choose the way you were going to die? What would it be? More importantly, would you use it when the time was right?

These were questions Koh Kwan How and his friends often tossed around when he was much younger. Now almost all those friends were gone, and Kwan How was looking at joining them soon. At eighty-three, he had seen a lot of life and too much of death. And now he knew, very much so, which way he would choose. And yes, he was ready to use it. He knew what constituted the perfect exit. And he also knew that it was just about the right time.

All his pleasures were being snatched from him: old friends, loved ones, places he had known and loved. And now even simple, everyday pleasures were being stripped away. It seemed every time he went to his doctor, the man had another list of things he had to deny himself. Kwan How had begun calling the man Dr No: no spicy food, no Kopi-O, no alcohol, no pets ... no, no, no. And, of course, no major physical exertion. His heart was far too weak, his doctor warned, just couldn't take sudden exertion. "No sex, of course," the pompous shit had instructed him. Then he had the gall to add, with that smug grin men like him seemed to take pleasure in, "But I guess in your case, that hasn't been any real temptation for a long time, has it, Mr

Koh?"

That ass! Koh was tempted almost every day, at least twenty times. Just because he could no longer act on it ... Until about ten years ago, maybe less, he would make his way to Geylang once every fortnight. He'd look around, see what was on offer, then head off to a massage parlour or take a hotel room with one of the pretty China girls who trawled the coffee shops there, looking for old men like him with their plump pensions. What mainly transpired with these girls, at either the parlours or in the hotels, was what Koh and his friends used to call "a quick, helpful handshake below the waist." Well, he was an old man, even then.

But he still yearned, achingly, to make love to lovely young women as he had many years before, when he himself was much closer to their age. But that, he knew, was just the faint buzz of a dream he could never act upon. Or so he thought.

He met her through the Internet. A nephew had shown him how to connect with the contact groups; after several rounds of exploring, Kwan How came upon the kinkier groups himself. And with that, the one he wanted: the Beyond the Borders group.

He was quite surprised that so many women replied to his blunt request: "Older gentleman seeks lovely young lady to help him kill himself through sex." He was worried that at least half of them were police agents who might see this endeavour as a form of assisted suicide. But for Kwan How, it was simply a matter of "imposing a natural death"; as Dr No took delight in reminding him, vigorous sex would almost surely be the end of him. Which was exactly what he wanted. It was, for Koh, the perfect exit.

And this one was perfect in her own way. He had scanned through at least a dozen photos sent to him on the Net, and they all looked interesting, but he was jolted when her picture came up. Su Lon. No, it wasn't her,

couldn't be; but it looked so much like her, as he remembered her, from over sixty years earlier.

Su Lon was the first love of his life. In some ways, still the only special love. His first love, his first sexual experience. And now this one—what was that name? Sharlayne, this Sharlayne looked so much like his Su Lon. As if she had somehow sprung over all those decades, as lovely as ever, preserved simply by his memory of her. Incredible.

He made contact and they bounced several e-mails back and forth before he sent her his telephone number. Then there was nothing for four days. He began to think she was just playing with him, using him as a joke she could share with her gleefully callous friends. But late that Sunday evening the phone rang, waking him up. “Mr Koh, this is Sharlayne. From that Beyond the Borders group? You wanted me to help you with your project?”

“Yes, yes,” he replied. “That’s right. I … I would like your help. Very much.”

They arranged to meet the following weekend, at his place. He would take care of all the formalities, he assured her, including any necessary legal precautions. There would be no way any authorities would associate her with his death. This would be seen as purely a consensual act between two adults—with very unfortunate consequences. He was surprised that she didn’t seem too concerned about this part of the arrangement though.

When she arrived around 4 pm Saturday, he was waiting nervously for her. In fact, Koh was perched on a metal chair facing the front door, reading fitfully from a newspaper while throwing glances at the open door. He had almost convinced himself that she wasn’t going to come after all. *Fool, why would such a lovely young woman want to do something as perverse as this anyway? With someone like you?*

When the bell rang, he couldn’t see her through the grill: evidently,

she was standing off to the side. Koh quickly threw his paper down, hauled himself up, went to let her in. When he opened the grill, she peeked from around the corner. “Mr Koh, is it?”

“Yes, yes,” Koh replied. “Koh Kwan How. Just Kwan, if you like. Kwan is fine.”

She nodded and stepped in. She seemed strangely shy at this point, considering how they had met and what she was there for. She was even looking down, demure in a way he would never have expected from this new, anything-goes generation. When she glanced up, this girl looked even more like Su Lon than she had on the monitor. He was staring at her, transfixed, until finally she peered at him nervously. “What?”

“Incredible,” Koh said in a raspy voice. “Oh, sorry, it’s just ... You look very much like someone I ... I knew. A long, long time ago.”

“Do I? Oh yeah, thanks. You look like a lot of people I know too, uncle.” Koh winced at her calling him uncle, but not enough for her to notice.

He offered her a drink, then found her a can of the Yeo’s chrysanthemum tea she had asked for. After taking a long draught, she frowned and looked around the room, as if assessing his taste in furnishings or sense of feng shui. For a moment, he was even afraid that she was about to tell him that she had reconsidered and now just wanted to call the whole thing off. But instead, she said something that stunned him. “You want to, like, take our clothes off, uncle, see what we’re talking about?”

“Yes, yes, that might be ... That’s a good way to start, I’m sure.” He was still a little stunned by her directness when she started to pull off her shirt, then removed her pants. As she stood there in only bra and panties, he mechanically put his hands to his shirt and began fumbling with the buttons, still staring at her, enthralled.

Curiously, she removed her panties first, then thrust her hips forward

slightly, as if displaying some unusual wares to a prospective buyer. He was still fumbling with that same top button as she reached back, unhooked her bra and let it drop to the floor. Koh's fingers froze on the button. *Dear God, even her body looks like Su Lon's.* Or at least the way he remembered it. The compact, tight breasts, the neat, dark triangle of pubic hair with the delicate slit in the middle—everything, so close to how he remembered it. He reacted immediately. It was ... he didn't want to think how many years since he was able to even get this hard without considerable manual or oral stimulation.

“You ... you have a fantastic body,” he gasped.

“My tits are too small,” she replied, looking down as if to test his evaluation. “My friends keep telling me I should go and get them enlarged. It doesn't cost that much at this one place I heard about.”

“Oh no. Oh no, no, don't ... don't do that. They're incredible. They fit your body perfectly. You couldn't ask for a better pair of breasts than what you've got there.”

“Well, they'll do for now, I guess,” she concluded, giving a soft shrug. He had just managed to get the first button undone at that point and was trying to concentrate intensely on the rest of the task when she stepped forward. “Here, let me help you with that,” she said.

Again, he was taken aback as she reached those delicate hands—so like Su Lon's—out to touch him. His fingers were frozen again, and she had to move his hands away gently, then she slowly undid every button. He stared at her now deeply intent face, not wanting to peer at his own body. He was deeply ashamed of it, even repulsed at its wattles of loose flesh, its liver flecks splashed sporadically all over his torso and arms, its wrinkles even in what he once thought unlikely places.

After removing the shirt, she reached down and unbuckled his belt, opened the trousers and eased them down over his hips. When they sagged

around his knees, he reached down and hastily pulled them off himself. Again, he was embarrassed: the elaborate webbing of varicose veins made his legs an unpleasant sight, especially to himself.

But again, she was being generous, or just polite. She ignored the varicose legs and began staring directly at the sharp rise in his shorts. She looked at him, smiled, nudged the near-erection slightly up and forwards, then pulled down the briefs.

“Oh look, you’re almost ready for action, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t intend to make your trip over here wasted, la. Bedroom’s over this way.”

He pointed to the room at the end of a hallway, and guided her towards it. Along the way, he grabbed a towel off a nearby chair and drooped it in front of his crotch. He felt giddy with this wholly new experience, but still couldn’t help feeling funny walking around naked in his own flat, especially with a young woman present.

As they headed towards the bedroom, Koh suddenly stopped near the bulky Peranakan table standing guard in the middle of the room and pointed to a small leather bag perched near the edge. “Those are for you by the way. Don’t forget to take them when you leave.”

“What is it?

“It’s … I know we said no money, no payment, but it’s presents. Some presents I got for you. Just thought it will be nice, lah. The money won’t do me any more good anyway, will it?”

Before he could say anything else, she’d darted over to the table and started fumbling through the bag. “Hey, those are surprises, lah. For later. Afterwards.”

“Can’t I open one, just one? That’s all.”

Even her little-girl manner when she asked reminded him of Su Lon.

He smiled back at her. "Alright, just one." He raised an admonishing finger. "But no more!"

She smiled and chose something in a long, narrow box. "Ooo, what's this one? Something we might be able to use in there? Looks like it."

He chortled. "No, it's just for you. It's all things I thought you might like."

She slid the top off the thin box, reached in and pulled out a slender gold necklace. "Oh, that's beautiful," she whispered. "It's ... wow, just so sweet of you." Koh smiled sheepishly. She stepped over and gave him a warm kiss, one that actually tasted of mild affection. He was embarrassed—and very pleased. She then broke into a wide smile. "Can I put it on now? Right now?"

"Now?? But I thought we're going to—"

"Oh, please, Mr Koh! I want to have something like this to wear. I'm always a little shy when I'm totally naked with some guy for the first time." She then cast a quick, playful glance down at his towel.

This made him laugh again, after which he nodded and watched as she placed the necklace against her smooth throat. She then turned, holding the ends behind and just off her neck, inviting him to latch it. Which he did, with care and some affection. She rushed over to the smeared mirror a few feet away and observed herself, making funny faces, as if she were suddenly the only person in the room. Koh himself admired her naked back, the nicely framed shoulders. "This is just so nice. So sweet." She turned with a deeply set smile, and Kwan How suddenly felt as close to her as he had to any woman, any person, in a long time. It was good that it should all end like this. This was becoming more and more perfect.

When they reached the bedroom, she jumped onto the bed as if she needed to try it out first. She pounded it with her fists, then started kicking her legs up and down. Koh was standing just inside the doorway, the towel

still dangling over his private parts. “Suitable?” he asked, his eyes slowly surveying the arch of her back, the slopes of her buttocks, her nicely formed legs and feet.

“Very suitable,” she replied.

She then rolled over on her back, propped her head up on the three pillows and spread her legs. “Going to join me, Mr Koh? It’s nice down here. *Very nice.*” As she said those last two words, she started stroking herself, at the same time slipping her tongue out and gliding it slowly over her lips.

Koh laughed again; she looked so much like Su Lon, but was so different in her behaviour. She was—what was that word he liked?—frisky. Yes, *so* frisky. Su Lon had been *so* wonderfully shy, right up until the moment he first entered her. Of course, that was expected of girls, especially Chinese girls, in those days.

But part of Su Lon’s reluctance with Kwan How stemmed from the fact that she was engaged to another man at the time. Oh, there was nothing like love there—on either side apparently—but it was a good match in most other ways. The war and the Japanese occupation had stranded that fiancé in Ceylon. Meanwhile, Kwan How’s position at the docks enabled him to get his hands on extra goods: contraband rice, salted fish and cooking oil—some of which he gave to Su Lon’s family. That’s how they started to get close. And then there was that keen natural attraction that happens between two young, good-looking people.

Had there been no war, Su Lon would have surely remained a traditional Chinese woman, going to her wedding bed a virgin, with a man she barely knew and had no great affection for. That was the deal back then: sex as duty, marriage as transaction, love as a possible bonus—but only later.

Except that she and Kwan How found themselves more and more drawn to each other. Besides, Su Lon didn’t know if she would ever see this fiancé

again; it was all up to fate whether any of them would survive that war and the occupation. Which is why she and Kwan How became lovers, their daily flirts with arrest and death only intensifying the passion and tonic release of their couplings. Yes, being so close to death, Kwan How had lived more intensely than he would ever again in his life.

Everything could have been different, should have been different. But the war ended, Su Lon's betrothed returned, they married, and Kwan How saw or heard very little of her for the next year and a half. Until he got that note from her brother. Sweet, delicate Su Lon, who had survived the storm of perils thrown up by the Japanese occupation, stepped in front of a Bentley driven by some *blur* Dutch woman. She was dead by the time they got her to a hospital. Publicly, everyone said it was an accident, but under the soothing drone of officialese, there was a swarm of dark rumours.

“Is everything alright?” Sharlayne called from the bed.

Koh looked up at her and nodded. Yes, everything was alright; maybe that was the perfect exit Su Lon had chosen for herself. “She heard another music,” was the cryptic way a friend once described the way she died. And now Koh was there, at the edge of grasping an amazing dream for his own departure. *Perhaps this was what she'd meant by another music?*

* * *

Sharlayne was now stroking herself more energetically, three fingers working deeply into the gash, moving about in slow, circular turns. “Everything is wonderful,” Koh finally said, “more wonderful than I could have imagined it.”

“Well, why don’t you come over here, uncle, and we’ll see how we can make it even better.” Koh nodded in agreement and strode over, dropping the

towel only as he made his way onto the bed.

He had become soft by now and only when he put his legs and side against her flesh did he again feel the stirrings in his loins and in his chest which had been so strong just minutes before. He wanted to get hard as quickly as he could, to couple with this young woman. Wanted to return, however briefly, to feeling life intensely. His look obviously conveyed this, as Sharlayne asked if he wanted some help. Suddenly feeling humiliated, Koh simply nodded. "Yeah?" she said sympathetically. Koh then leaned over and whispered in her ear.

But she said she didn't want to go down on him, claiming she "wasn't into" oral sex. He didn't believe her, of course. But she was solicitous: to get him harder, she began stroking his cock, then licked her fingers lavishly, moistening his member as she stroked it a second time. She then stuck two fingers up her vagina, pulled them out and rubbed the warm juice along the high bend of his cock.

Koh could not even remember the last time he had been this hard, decades certainly. He wanted desperately to get inside her and rasp this out. But at that moment, there was an abrupt change in her demeanour: she rose and knelt on the bed. For the first time since they had started undressing, she looked grim. "Are you sure this can really kill you?" she asked, "Really?"

"That's what my doctor keeps saying." She nodded, but did not look very convinced.

"You ever asked for a second opinion?"

He smiled sheepishly. "I'm about to get one." She frowned again, concern darkening her delicate features. She cast her eyes down and started tracing some arcane pattern in the sheets with one finger. "Look, it's what I really want, okay?" he assured her. "I have no doubts about this." She glanced up at him, cautiously, from the corner of her eye. He was afraid he

might lose this right here, so close to what he wanted. “Are you going to deny a nice old man his last request?”

“No,” she answered after a short pause. “It’s something I really want to try myself.” She then leaned over, gave him a light kiss on the forehead, and pressing her head against his neck, hugged him awkwardly. This was good enough; at this stage in his life, the “uncle” had sharply pared down what he expected from perfect.

Koh now smiled, a little sadly, at her. Sharlayne took this as a cue, lay back flat on the bed and stared straight up, as if studying something on the ceiling. Koh kept smiling; it didn’t matter, not now. She spread her legs, her thin legs, and Koh thought he would begin by putting his legs tightly against hers and then massaging the insides of her thighs—as he had done that first time with Su Lon.

But as he tried to splay his legs that far, he found that his weak knees weren’t up to the task. He fell forward, giving out a yelp of pain.

Sharlayne, who had continued peering up at the ceiling until then, swung around swiftly, asked if Koh was alright, and rubbed his shoulders in consolation. He tried to shake it off as lightly as he could. “Guess one shouldn’t try new tricks, wah,” he said with a feeble laugh. The embarrassment actually hurt more than the physical pain. She asked if he wanted her to get on top, but he mumbled that he preferred being on top of her. She nodded, then lay back on the bed, her hair draped capriciously across the pillows.

Still smarting a little from his fall, Koh now crawled up to Sharlayne gingerly. When he was positioned just right, he breathed deeply, then carefully arched his groin above hers. Sharlayne reached up, took his cock and slowly started to pull him into her. *Oh wei!* She felt fantastic, not like some human masturbation device—like those Geylang whores—but like a woman, just the way Su Lon once was with him. He slowly started thrusting

his cock into her, getting the feel of her vagina.

He then began pumping harder, harder, first just with his butt and hips, then with his upper body as well. He was giving her everything he could, trying to fuck her in a way that she would always remember, fucking as if there were no tomorrow.

Because that was the whole point, wasn't it? There shouldn't be any tomorrow for Koh Kwan How. This was his perfect exit, this act of lovemaking as fantastic as his very first one with Su Lon, with a girl who looked so much like Su Lon did back then.

As he began thrusting himself fearsomely into her, Sharlayne herself seemed to become more and more excited. Her eyes were shut tight, which should have disturbed Koh, but it didn't. If that made her feel better with him, even if she was thinking about some boyfriend or pop star, then it was the right thing. He started fucking even more furiously, giving everything he could draw up. His body's frantic stabs seemed to be moving a beat or two ahead of his breaths and he was starting to get giddy. Was this it then, was this how it would all end? He tried speeding up even more, pushing himself harder, more urgently.

It was then that Sharlayne finally opened her eyes, focused point blank into his so all she could see were his eyes seeing hers and, clutching him desperately by the lower lean of his back, she moaned, "Oh God, fuck me, fuck me hard, *fuck me this way forever!*"

As he responded to her, his words came out in erratic gasps, pulled out from what reserve wind he wasn't using for the fucking. "Yes ... yes, I'll ... as ... hard ... as ... you ... need. As ... hard ... as. ..." He was unable to force out any more words.

Without opening her eyes, she moaned, "Yes, do it, do it—deeper, more deeper. Oh please—all the way."

Koh plunged as deep as he could into her, pumping with everything he had left in him. His eyes, too, were closed tightly now, yet he saw her face as clearly as he had just a few moments before. “Oh yes, dee … deeper. Here you are, finally—my angel. My lovely, lovely angel of death.”

And just as he said it, he burst, his cock pulsating in a sad stutter of throbs. His semen came out in short, painful jerks. He started giving short cries as he came; he realised he must sound like a wounded seal thrown onto a beach. He was fighting to snatch random breaths, his lungs and throat felt seared, his nostrils stung, every part of his body was starting to rebel as pain coursed through him from neck to ankles.

All of which, he realised, meant that he was still alive. His perfect plan had failed.

He felt the need to explain, to apologise, to share one more thing more with this lovely young woman. “I didn’t think I’d … still be able to …” He stopped, and realised he was crying. After several moments, he forced himself to shut off the tears, then he turned back to explain.

As he did, he realised that she had said nothing since his climax; in fact, she had barely budged. As he finally looked at her, it was as if a huge slap was there just waiting for him to turn around: Sharlayne seemed to be unconscious, eyes closed. Not only that, her breathing was extremely shallow, like that of some people he had seen just before they left.

With all the fretted strength he could muster, he pulled himself up and tried shaking her. At this, her eyes opened slightly and one hand moved weakly to the necklace. She raised it slightly, said, “Thank you again. Very generous,” before her eyelids slid closed once more. This time, she seemed to be hardly breathing at all.

Koh struggled from the bed and made his way to the table where the phone rested. Hands shaking so badly he was barely up to the task, he punched

out the number of his one close nephew, Daniel. He had arranged for Daniel to drop by at six, to “pick something up.” Of course, he was supposed to find Koh dead. But that was well over an hour away. Koh needed him there *now*.

He cursed when the droning buzzes ended with the recorded voice saying, “Sorry, the M1 customer you just called is not responding. Please try again later.” The old man slammed his phone back into its cradle. *Stupid, so stupid! Why even have a handphone if you’re not going to leave it on, make yourself available when people need you in an emergency like this?*

So, Koh reluctantly called emergency services. And after hanging up, he settled himself into the creaking chair next to the table and stared over at her, his quivering hands set flat on his thighs. *Oh my God, this is how I sit at a wake. But that’s not the situation here; she’s young, she’ll be fine, this is most likely just ... just what?*

Yes, just what was this anyway? For that matter, why had this lovely young woman agreed to come over and have sex with some pathetic old man who had some crazy plan to end his own life? He was well acquainted with his own plan, how beautiful it was, but he suddenly wondered what her reason was for participating. As the heavy moments dragged past, these questions grew more and more vexing for Kwan How.

He pulled himself up, staggered over and stood at the foot of the bed. Her mouth now hung open; she didn’t seem to be breathing at all. Koh wanted to put his hand to the mouth to test her for breaths, maybe try to feel a pulse. But at the moment he was terrified to come any closer. He stared, fixed in a state just short of shock. *How did this girl end up like this in my bed?* Just lying there, maybe dead, she looked—he hated to even visit this thought—but she looked ... yes, perfect.

He picked up a blanket from the edge of the bed and spread it over her, to protect her decency for when the medical-emergency team arrived. And

he still could not keep from staring at her. She had this amazing look etched into her face. As if she had just achieved something beautiful. And now he imagined that that mouth was open so that she could sing some sublime, silent song. Yes, there was now something irredeemably perfect about this moment. Although it was mainly hers, he had a share of it.

Koh dropped the towel wrapped around his own midriff and climbed onto the bed. He lifted the blanket and started to slide under it. But no, although he ached to touch her naked body again with his, he realised he couldn't.

He wrapped the blanket tightly all around her, pulled up closer and folded his arm around her. She still felt so warm, looked so lovely here. He rested his head firmly against hers, listening as hard as he could.

At first, he just wanted to hear some breathing, but when he couldn't detect any, he strained his ears to listen to that silent song he imagined her singing. *This was surely the anthem of the perfect exit.* When he, too, could hear it, he would know how to reach that point, as she did. He waited.

About the author:

Aaron Ang is a Singapore-based writer with a passion for both Literature and History. He has published a number of short pieces, many on historical topics, including sports history. One of his cold-case mystery stories was included in the collection *Crime Scene: Singapore* (Monsoon Books). His short story *A Perfect Exit* (first published in *Best of Singapore Erotica*) was made into a TV film on Singapore's Mediacorp.

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